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ANTHONY BELL, DAVID WITTER, AND MICHAEL WHITTAKER

AFGHANISTAN REPORT 9

REVERSING THE NORTHEASTERN INSURGENCY



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Cover Photograph: Arbaki fighters and Afghan National Police patiently wait to go on patrol within the Gor Tapa region, Kunduz province, Afghanistan, during a combined operation involving both Afghan national security and International Security Assistance Forces.

Photo Credit: Sgt. 1st Class John Queen, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division Public Affairs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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KEY FINDINGS

- Security in the northeastern Afghanistan provinces of Kunduz, Takhar and Baghlan deteriorated between early 2008 and fall of 2010.
 - Limited deployment of International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) allowed insurgent groups to develop safe havens from which to attack ISAF and ANSF forces.
 - Several insurgent groups are active within these northeastern provinces, specifically the Quetta Shura Taliban, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.
- The arrival of additional ISAF forces in March 2010 provided the combat power necessary to confront the insurgent groups; major joint ISAF-ANSF clearing operations began across the provinces in October 2010.
- The ISAF and ANSF operations across the three provinces focused on limited objectives of securing transit routes and clearing insurgent strongholds, in contrast to population-centric counterinsurgency strategies found in southern Afghanistan.
- Kunduz province is the center of gravity for the northeastern insurgency, due to the major ISAF supply routes that run through the province as well as the Taliban's ability to win over much of the Pashtun population. The province's border with Tajikistan is also a key link for drug and weapon smuggling.
 - ISAF and ANSF forces moved clockwise through the province and conducted clearing operations from October 2010 to January 2011, targeting a number of insurgent safe havens.
 - These operations destroyed several key insurgent strongholds in the southern and central regions of the province and degraded insurgent abilities to launch attacks; however, safe havens in the north and east were not cleared definitively and local security officials have been attacked in recent high profile suicide bombings.
- In Takhar province, insurgent groups gained control of lucrative drug and weapon smuggling routes to Tajikistan, providing funding that helps fuel the northeastern insurgency.
 - ANSF offensives between October 2010 and February 2011 concentrated on securing the strategically important highway running through the province's northwest corridor. These operations were conducted with minimal ISAF support.
 - Despite ANSF gains in reversing the insurgency in Takhar, the province continues to be a major conduit for drugs and weapons smuggling into Central Asia. This is largely due to the systemic corruption within the Afghan security forces along with the influence of regional powerbrokers and their control of smuggling networks.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- Baghlan province is a strategic crossroad for ISAF, ANSF, and insurgent forces. Highways that run through the province serve as major supply routes for ISAF convoys, and insurgent groups use local roads as transit lines to Kunduz and Takhar.
 - ISAF and ANSF forces launched joint operations from November 2010 to March 2011, clearing the areas surrounding major highways and destroying insurgent safe havens.
 - The joint operations secured key ISAF supply routes through the province, and eliminated insurgent strongholds in several districts.
- Operations across Kunduz, Takhar and Baglan appear to have been successful in reversing insurgent momentum in the northeast. Areas cleared by ISAF and ANSF forces are currently held by Afghan Local Police and *arbakai*, government-sponsored initiatives that arm local tribesmen and former militants to defend against insurgent groups.
- The gains from these operations, however, may be at risk of backsliding. The limited ISAF and ANSF presence across all three provinces precludes a widespread deployment of security forces to hold cleared terrain and the Afghan Local Police and *arbakai*—tasked with providing long term security—suffer from poor discipline and corruption.

REVERSING THE NORTHEASTERN INSURGENCY

By Anthony Bell, David Witter, and Michael Whittaker

The unexpected rise of violence in northern Afghanistan that began in 2008 revealed that the insurgency had expanded its presence into a previously uncontested region. This expansion fueled concerns among the United States and its allies that the security situation in previously stable areas was deteriorating. In March 2010, as part of President Obama's troop surge, several thousand U.S. forces deployed to northeastern Afghanistan for the first time and began conducting operations alongside German and Afghan security forces. These operations have generally been successful and violence has considerably diminished. Insurgents have been routed from many key districts, their shadow government has been battered, and hundreds of fighters have been killed, captured, or switched-sides. Still, challenges remain and the inability of the small number of International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) forces to hold cleared territories, as well as the long-term consequences of over-reliance on local militias to provide security, are of particular concern.

This report provides an assessment of recent operations by ISAF and the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) to secure Kunduz, Baghlan, and Takhar provinces in northeastern Afghanistan. The report begins with a detailed analysis of the dynamics driving insurgent activity in these provinces and an overview of the ISAF and ANSF offensives since the fall of 2010, which sought to dislodge insurgents, restore security, and train the Afghan security forces. The report concludes with an evaluation of the progress made in the region and identifies the challenges ahead for ISAF and the Afghan government.

THE RISE OF THE NORTHEASTERN INSURGENCY

Since the fall of 2010, ISAF and ANSF have conducted a series of operations in the northeastern Afghan provinces of Kunduz, Takhar, and Baghlan. These coordinated operations were an attempt to reverse the insurgency's momentum in each province by dismantling insurgent networks, clearing safe-havens, and reestablishing the presence of Afghan security forces. Militants sought to create the perception of a nationwide insurgency that extended beyond traditional Taliban power

centers in the south and to seize control of arms and drug smuggling routes into Central Asia. Conditions in these three northern provinces were ideal for the militants' purposes: warlords held greater power than the Afghan government, the Pashtun population was politically marginalized, and there were few ISAF or ANSF troops present. Each of these three provinces played a unique role in this regional dynamic. Kunduz province, a strategic crossroads for the Northeast, emerged as the center of gravity for the northeastern insurgency in 2008. Since then, the Taliban has entrenched itself among the province's Pashtun populace and mounted a strong resistance to ISAF and ANSF offensives. Militants have increasingly staged high-profile attacks on Afghan and coalition targets. In Takhar, enemy groups have controlled the province's key narcotics and weapons trafficking routes into Tajikistan. The ANSF vied for control of these routes, conducting operations independent of conventional ISAF units. Finally, in Baghlan, insurgents and coalition forces have wrestled for control of areas along major highways where militants have threatened to disrupt ISAF's northern supply routes.

The insurgency in northeastern Afghanistan is comprised of numerous militant and terrorist

organizations that share command and control at the provincial level. The major insurgent groups operating in the Northeast are the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Several commanders and attacks have also had suspected links to the Haqqani Network (HQN) and al-Qaeda. Cooperation among the major groups occurs to such a degree that there appear to be overlapping command-and-control structures between them, with commanders leading multiple organizations.¹ As elsewhere in Afghanistan, the insurgency in the Northeast largely, but not exclusively, draws its strength from the region's ethnic Pashtun population. Pashtuns comprise a minority in the North where they are outnumbered by ethnic Uzbek and Tajiks; this is not the case in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The insurgency has reportedly remobilized many local HiG commanders and their foot soldiers, while Taliban enablers have traveled from southern Afghanistan and Pakistan to take up district and provincial-level leadership positions. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of insurgent cooperation is the significant role played by members of the IMU, an Uzbek terrorist group aligned with al-

Qaeda and partially based out of the Pakistani tribal region.² The IMU, which has a deep history of involvement in smuggling in Central Asia, appears to be facilitating drug and arms trafficking networks into Tajikistan.³ The insurgents have also allied with various criminal elements involved in smuggling along Afghanistan's northern border. These criminal networks compete for control of the drug trafficking routes against local powerbrokers, corrupt police, and government officials, including some who are linked to the highest-levels of the Afghan government and security forces.

ISAF and ANSF's mutually supporting operations across these three provinces were made possible by the arrival of the 1st Battalion, 87th Regiment of the 10th Mountain Division in March 2010.⁴ Before 1-87's arrival, which brought total ISAF forces to roughly 3,500 troops, international presence was limited to U.S. Special Operations forces and a German contingent that was constrained by restrictive rules of engagement. Since 2003, several thousand German soldiers attached to Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have also been active in Kunduz, but with mandates that initially restricted their activity to performing development



MAP 21 | ISAF & ANSF CLEARING OPERATIONS - NOVEMBER 2010



MAP 31 | ISAF & ANSF CLEARING OPERATIONS - DECEMBER 2010



MAP 4 | ISAF & ANSF CLEARING OPERATIONS - JANUARY 2011



MAP 5 | ISAF & ANSF CLEARING OPERATIONS - MARCH 2011

work. While German forces did occasionally engage in combat operations against the burgeoning northeastern insurgency from 2008 to 2010, their small numbers and restrictive rules of engagement limited their effectiveness in maintaining security and training the ANSF. Meanwhile, the region's ANSF units were stripped of manpower to bolster security forces in more volatile areas of the country. This further exacerbated the Northeast's security challenges.⁵ U.S. Special Operations forces arrived in summer 2009, directing airstrikes and conducting raids against high-value enemy targets. These forces also recruited and fought alongside local militias, known as *arbakai*.⁶

ISAF and ANSF clearing operations began in southern Kunduz and northwestern Takhar in October 2010.⁷ The I-87 spearheaded ISAF operations while the Afghan National Army's (ANA) 209th Shahin Corps and the 303rd Pamir Zone of Afghan National Police (ANP), led by Tajik General Mohammad Daud Daud, constituted the bulk of Afghan forces. From October 2010 to early February 2011, ISAF and ANSF forces pushed clockwise through Kunduz, clearing insurgents from several hostile districts before arriving at

Archi district along the Takhar border in late January 2011. In Takhar, the ANSF pressed south, clearing insurgents from the province's northwest corridor before arriving at Khwaja Ghar district along the Kunduz border in February 2011. These coordinated operations appeared to have driven insurgents into the two districts on either side of the Kunduz and Takhar border, Archi and Khwaja Ghar. In Baghlan, ISAF and ANSF operations beginning in November 2010 aimed at clearing insurgents from areas surrounding the province's major highways. These mutually-supporting operations were designed to reverse insurgent momentum in the Northeast and secure the region's key highways.

CLEARING KUNDUZ PROVINCE

The security situation in Kunduz is closely linked to the province's terrain. With the exception of the provincial capital of Kunduz City, Afghanistan's fifth-largest city, Kunduz is a largely rural province. Most residents live along the province's three major rivers, fertile regions that support an economy centered on agriculture and animal husbandry. The Kunduz and Khanabad Rivers



MAP 61 | KUNDUZ PROVINCE

flow from Baghlan and Takhar, respectively, while the Pyanj River (often incorrectly referred to as the Amu Darya River) forms the northern border with Tajikistan. The population is further concentrated into these “green zones” by a series of mountains and dry plains in the west, east, and center of the province. These more austere parts of Kunduz have few roads and are difficult to traverse, making entry into the more populated regions dependent on only a handful of routes. Insurgent groups have used this geography to their advantage by settling in regions often bordered on several sides by rivers, mountains or plains, thereby forcing ISAF or ANSF forces to use a single road to enter the area. Additionally, insurgents are believed to use the mountainous safe-havens in eastern Kunduz to escape military operations in the more populated parts of the province.

The violence in Kunduz is due largely to its strategic geographical location and the Taliban’s ability to win over much of the province’s large Pashtun population. The provincial capital of Kunduz,

Kunduz City, sits at the juncture of two main roads: Route 2 running from the northern border down to Kabul, and Route 302, facilitating east-west travel between Balkh and Badakhshan. Control of this juncture is essential to maintaining lines of communication throughout northern Afghanistan. In their push to gain control of this crucial juncture, the Taliban have been able to draw on the province’s sizable Pashtun population. Pashtuns represent the largest ethnic group in Kunduz, (roughly a third of the province’s 800,000 residents). This is the highest concentration of Pashtuns in one province in northeastern Afghanistan.

This demography is unique to Kunduz, as Pashtuns are a minority group in many of the surrounding provinces. Pashtuns have reason to be predisposed to supporting the Taliban: between November 2001 and January 2002, a series of attacks in northern Afghanistan by Uzbek and Tajik militias drove out much of the Pashtun community.⁸ This displacement continues to fuel conflict today, as many Pashtuns have recently returned and

discovered that Tajiks and Uzbeks have moved onto what used to be their property.⁹

Kunduz province experienced a surge of violence in late 2007 as insurgents made substantial inroads into several districts. Chahar Dara, Imam Sahib, and Archi districts, as well as Gor Teppah region of Kunduz district, quickly became hostile areas for ISAF forces.¹⁰ Patrols by the German PRT were frequently targeted by improvised explosive devices (IEDs), limiting their freedom of movement through insurgent strongholds. Suicide bombings also began to target the German troops as well as the ANP.¹¹ With only roughly 1,200 German and other ISAF troops and similarly under-manned ANSF units, security forces were spread too thin to hold any terrain cleared of insurgents.¹² The security situation continued to deteriorate in 2008 and 2009, as the small contingent of security forces struggled to counter growing Taliban influence.¹³

In the fall of 2009, the PRT shifted from biweekly patrolling throughout the province towards establishing permanently-manned Combat Outposts (COPs), focusing mainly in Chahar Dara.¹⁴ These COPs, by design, attracted insurgent attacks but allowed ISAF to project force in and around the immediate area. When I-87 arrived and assumed responsibility for security operations along with ANSF troops early in the summer of 2010, the PRT was re-tasked to focus their efforts on development.¹⁵ I-87 further expanded ISAF presence throughout the province after their arrival in March 2010, patrolling frequently in contested areas and establishing checkpoints manned by ANSF.¹⁶

Fighting alongside German and Afghan security forces, I-87 began clearing operations in October 2010 in the southwestern district of Chahar Dara and the southern district of Aliabad. Chahar Dara has been a major insurgent safe haven since the beginning of the northeastern insurgency in late 2007; ISAF and ANSF forces operating in and around this district suffered frequent IED, direct fire, and suicide attacks.¹⁷ In mid-October 2010, ISAF conducted a six-day operation into central Chahar Dara and Aliabad, resulting in the surrender of close to sixty militants and the deaths of several others.¹⁸ This was likely a shaping

operation, designed to prepare the region for longer, more sustained combat operations. This offensive began in earnest on November 1, 2010 when ISAF and ANSF forces began clearing eleven villages in Chahar Dara.¹⁹ The operation targeted the eastern part of the district and extended south into northern Aliabad, clearing IEDs along the western bank of the Kunduz River.²⁰ Clearing Aliabad better secured ISAF supply lines traveling south along Route 2.

ISAF began operations in northern areas of Chahar Dara in late November 2010. This part of the district was considered to be the primary staging area for key insurgent commanders, including several affiliated with the IMU. This effort sought to kill or capture IMU leaders suspected of facilitating the movement of suicide bombers from Pakistan to Kunduz.²¹ From November 26th to December 11th, operations killed and captured dozens of militants throughout several villages in Chahar Dara and Gor Teppah, the latter a restive area situated between the Kunduz and Khanabad rivers north of Chahar Dara.²²

The death of the Taliban deputy shadow governor for Kunduz, Maulawi Bahadur, during a raid in late December 2010 illustrates the increasing unity of effort among insurgent groups as well as the geographic centrality of Kunduz. Bahadur was killed during a joint raid into Qandahari, a village in southern Chahar Dara.²³ In addition to his role in directing Taliban operations in Kunduz, Bahadur was linked to insurgent cells in neighboring Balkh and Baghlan provinces.²⁴ Bahadur was also linked to members of the IMU, indicating close cooperation between the Taliban and the IMU in Kunduz.²⁵ It is possible that his connection to the IMU helped in executing suicide attacks in the region, as foreign fighters have traditionally been more willing than Afghans to carry out suicide attacks. Bahadur was also reported to have facilitated IED distribution in several provinces.²⁶

Insurgents responded to ISAF operations by launching several attacks against Afghan security and government officials. These officials were targeted because they were more vulnerable to attack than ISAF units, and their deaths would intimidate other pro-ISAF government workers. Insurgent

bombings targeted the ANA headquarters and the district governor of Chahar Dara in mid-December 2010. The most brazen attack was on December 19th when four insurgents, armed with automatic weapons and wearing explosive vests, opened fire in the courtyard of the ANA recruitment center in Kunduz City.²⁷ In the daylong firefight that followed, eight Afghan soldiers and police officers were killed along with all of the attackers.²⁸ Intelligence indicated that the Gor Teppah area to the north of Chahar Dara had been used as a staging ground for this operation.²⁹

Shortly after the December 19th attack, U.S. Special Operation Forces conducted raids and shaping operations in Gor Teppah, an insurgent stronghold situated between the Kunduz and Khanabad rivers in the northwest of Kunduz district. The location of Gor Teppah, which is protected on three sides by rivers and only accessible by one main road, had made the area difficult for ISAF to penetrate.³⁰ Raids conducted in mid-December and early January in Gor Teppah and Kunduz City netted an IED factory and an imam (Muslim clergyman) suspected of having been involved in the December 19th attack.³¹ A number of foreign fighters were also among those killed during these raids, further indicating that insurgents used Gor Teppah as a staging ground for suicide attacks in Kunduz City.³²

The primary clearing operation in Gor Teppah was launched by ISAF, ANA, and ANP forces on December 28, 2010 with the objective of denying insurgents freedom of movement and securing the area's main highway.³³ Coalition forces targeted villages along the Kunduz river and near the main road.³⁴ These villages were most likely staging areas for planning suicide attacks; coalition forces killed several foreign fighters and discovered large quantities of bomb-making materials.³⁵ ISAF and ANSF forces also established checkpoints in several villages along the main highway, including Larkhabi, Qalacha, and Isa Khan, in the hopes of opening the road for Kunduz residents.³⁶ Operations in Gor Teppah extended into late January 2011, as ISAF continued to secure the areas around these checkpoints.³⁷

Imam Sahib, the northernmost district in Kunduz,

was the last district to be cleared by ISAF and ANSF forces, though *arbakai*—local militias opposed to the Taliban—had been active in the district for several months prior.³⁸ A joint clearing operation beginning on January 22nd appeared to have met minimal resistance. The ease with which Imam Sahib was cleared was likely due to mass defections by anti-government militants.³⁹ Beginning in early December, over one hundred militants joined pro-government forces, a phenomenon not seen in other districts in Kunduz.⁴⁰ These abrupt defections could be attributed to the Imam Sahib's role as a narcotics smuggling hub. Violence in the district is likely fueled by competition between rival militant groups for control of cross-border smuggling routes. The militants in Imam Sahib are largely drug smugglers, not ideologically committed members of the Taliban, and have little incentive to fight a protracted battle with ISAF forces intent on driving out irreconcilable insurgent forces. Additionally, by siding with the Afghan government, these fighters can become a legitimate part of the ANSF by enrolling into the Afghan Local Police (ALP). The ALP is an effort to transition local militias into a security force with formal ties to the Afghan government. Local militias undergo a month-long ISAF training program and are then paid by the government to maintain security in their area. The ALP appears to be the cornerstone of ISAF's long-term security strategy in Kunduz, as much of the ANP and the ANA are deployed in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. In vetting ALP candidates, ISAF is more concerned with preventing pro-Taliban militias from infiltrating the local police than it is in rooting out militias associated with the drug trade. It is likely that in Imam Sahib much of the ALP have links to the drug trade.

ISAF did not conduct similar clearing operations in the districts of Qala-e Zal, Khanabad, and Archi. In the case of Qala-e Zal, this is due to the successful efforts of an ethnic Uzbek *arbakai* to counter Taliban activity.⁴¹ The situation in Khanabad and Archi remains more ambiguous. There was little reported ISAF or ANSF activity in Khanabad during the fall of 2010 and winter of 2011. There was, however, a proliferation of *arbakai* activity in Khanabad, which according

to some reports suppressed insurgent activity.⁴² Coalition and Afghan forces conducted limited operations along a strip of ground surrounding the main road in northern part of Archi in late January.⁴³ Both Khanabad and Archi have been the site of high profile incidents, suggesting that both districts—Archi in particular—remain permissive to the insurgents. Several Kunduz government and security officials were targeted in Archi by IED attacks during the fall of 2010, including Kunduz Governor Mohammad Omar, the Kunduz City mayor, and a provincial intelligence officer.⁴⁴ Additionally, two Taliban commanders, one of whom was involved in kidnapping a Dutch non-governmental organization (NGO) worker in Takhar, were killed in northern Archi district by ISAF forces during a raid on January 10th.⁴⁵ The NGO worker had been kidnapped in Takhar and then held in Khanabad.⁴⁶ The commander responsible for the kidnapping was a dual-hatted Taliban and IMU leader, while the other was the Taliban district leader for Khanabad.⁴⁷

Clearing operations from mid-October 2010 to late January 2011 in Kunduz province were the most comprehensive operations hitherto conducted in northeastern Afghanistan and degraded the province's utility as a major insurgent safe haven in the region. It is likely that the targeting of these safe havens deprived militants of the ability to effectively conduct small unit assaults in the short-term.

Yet, insurgent suicide attacks on ANSF and government officials in Kunduz have continued. Four high profile attacks have already occurred since the conclusion of these operations. Suicide bombers killed the Chahar Dara district chief on February 10th and the Kunduz police chief a month later; almost seventy people were killed in two suicide attacks on ALP and ANA recruiting stations on February 21st and March 14th, respectively.⁴⁸ Insurgents have increasingly targeted local government and security officials just as ISAF becomes more reliant on these local actors to assume a greater role in providing security. Targeting these officials not only reduces the ability of local security forces to protect the population, but it also intimidates Afghans who may be willing to cooperate with the government against insurgent groups. Suicide attacks are likely to continue in

Kunduz and will undermine the credibility of security forces. This tactic that will be especially effective in Kunduz; tribal militias, lacking much formalized training yet newly empowered by ISAF to provide day-to-day security, often are not trusted by locals from different ethnic groups or tribes. The effectiveness of the *arbakai*-turned-ALP security establishment is already questionable, as they have a minimum of training and are often accused of abusing their power. Intimidating the population by launching spectacular suicide attacks could further undermine public confidence in the ALP. This is especially problematic because Afghans have allowed the Taliban to return in the past if local security forces do not adequately provide law and order.

INSURGENTS AND DRUGS IN TAKHAR

From October 2010 and until early February 2011, the ANSF conducted a series of operations aimed at clearing insurgents from the northwestern districts of Takhar province where the insurgency had expanded from Kunduz in recent years. These operations in Takhar are notable because they were planned, led, and executed solely by the ANSF. ISAF's role has been limited to infrequent Special Operations raids and airstrikes against insurgent leaders.⁴⁹ With the bulk of the operational responsibilities in Takhar resting on the ANSF, the offensive provides an early indication of the ANSF's ability to fight the insurgency with minimal ISAF support. Yet, it should be noted that both the insurgency and related ANSF operations in Takhar are several orders of magnitude smaller than those in southern and eastern Afghanistan, and quite small even when compared to those in Kunduz.

Takhar is a strategically significant province for the northeastern insurgency because it is a vital conduit for multiple narcotics and arms-trafficking networks moving wares across the province's porous border with Tajikistan.⁵⁰ Takhar is a largely rural province of approximately 900,000 residents, the majority of whom are ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks, although there is a small Pashtun populace. Tajiks are most prevalent in Takhar's passive eastern districts, while Uzbeks are concentrated in the center of the province and around the provincial

capital of Taloqan. In Takhar’s restive northwestern districts, the Uzbeks live alongside a minority Pashtun population.⁵¹

These northwestern districts of Takhar are the insurgent’s strongest area of influence in the province. Insurgent activity in the area is concentrated along the strategic highway that runs north-south. The highway shadows the Pyanj River as it forms the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, running through the rural agricultural districts of Khwaja Ghar, Dashti Qala, Khwaja Bahawudin, and Yangi Qala into Kunduz. Takhar’s northernmost district of Darqad, which is surrounded on all sides by the braided channels of the Pyanj River, is significant terrain for insurgent and criminal networks because it is a major crossing point for smuggling drugs and arms into Tajikistan.⁵²

Insurgents in Takhar are not vying for control of the province’s major population centers. Rather,

they have sought to control the lucrative smuggling routes between Darqad and Tajikistan and the highway that runs from Yangi Qala to Khwaja Ghar—which also links the insurgents to their strongholds in Kunduz province. The Taliban also maintains a close operational relationship with the IMU in the province. The two groups appear to share an overlapping command-and-control structure, as a number of Taliban leaders in Takhar have also been identified as IMU leaders.⁵³ This command structure may be a function of the unique insurgent environment in northwest Takhar. It allows the IMU to utilize its long established involvement in Central Asian smuggling networks to help fund and arm the northeastern insurgency.⁵⁴ The IMU may also be used by the Taliban as a means of easing the ethnic tensions between the former HiG commanders in the Takhar, many of whom are reportedly Uzbek, and the Pashtun ranks of the Taliban.⁵⁵

In October 2010, the ANSF launched operations



MAP 7 | TAKHAR PROVINCE

intended to clear insurgents from northwest Takhar and to reestablish the government's control over the area. The ANSF offensive swept north to south, starting in Darqad, and extending to Yangi Qala and then Khwaja Bahawudin. The ANSF established checkpoints along the northwest highway and conducted patrols to flush out insurgent positions.⁵⁶ As the ANSF moved to the far northwestern districts, they had no choice but to reinforce their security outposts stationed along the northwest highway in Khwaja Ghar in order to defend against frequent insurgent assaults.⁵⁷ While the ANSF fought to reestablish their presence in the area, U.S. Special Operations Forces, often operating alongside Afghans, conducted several intelligence-driven raids targeting the insurgents provincial leadership.⁵⁸ These raids followed the ANSF's movement south, as insurgent commanders for Darqad, Yangi Qala and Khwaja Bahawudin were killed or captured in succession by late October.⁵⁹

Insurgents did not resist outright the ANSF offensive in the northwest. Instead, they countered the push by hitting soft targets elsewhere in Takhar, mainly by attempting to assassinate Afghan government and security officials. On October 7th, insurgents ambushed the convoy of Takhar Chief of Police General Shah Jahan Noori, though he survived the attack after a protracted firefight.⁶⁰ The following day, a suicide bomber assassinated Kunduz Governor Mohammad Omar as he visited a mosque in Taloqan, the provincial capital of Takhar.⁶¹ The assassination of Governor Omar had been planned by the Takhar shadow governor Muhammad Alam in Darqad and several other Takhar commanders in conjunction with insurgent networks in Kunduz and elsewhere.⁶² The Taliban's assassination of Governor Omar was an important victory for the northeastern insurgency, as it underscored the Taliban's growing prowess in the Northeast and removed a key ISAF ally.

Despite the Taliban's high-profile assassination of Governor Omar, Afghan officials reaffirmed their confidence in the ANSF offensive in Takhar. General Noori stated the Takhar operations would continue until the districts were completely cleared.⁶³ Though it proceeded slowly, the ANSF continued operations to extend its control, and by

October 24th, the ANSF had wrestled control of the northwest highway from the insurgents, who had exercised complete control over it for at least seven months. The ANSF established ten checkpoints along the highway, extending the presence of security forces from Darqad to Taloqan.⁶⁴ Yet, it was quickly evident that merely clearing the insurgents off the highway was insufficient. Without dismantling insurgent sanctuaries in the rural villages surrounding the route, the new ANSF checkpoints were effectively isolated in hostile areas and vulnerable to insurgent attacks. On October 27th, insurgents launched heavy attacks on the new ANSF positions in Darqad. The following day, insurgents assaulted security outposts along the highway in Khwaja Ghar, overrunning the poorly-defended positions and looting police weapons before ANSF reinforcements arrived hours later.⁶⁵ The toughest challenge for the ANSF was not the initial action to take the highway from the insurgents. Rather, it was the painstaking but necessary follow-up operations of holding newly-won ground while expanding security to nearby insurgent-held areas.

Despite continued insurgent activity in northwestern Takhar, provincial officials announced on October 31st that the month-long ANSF offensive had succeeded and killed one hundred insurgents, while only sixteen ANSF members had been either killed or injured.⁶⁶ On November 4, General Daud, commander of the ANP for all of northern Afghanistan and a notorious figure who has been accused of involvement in Afghanistan's drug trade, stated that Darqad, Khwaja Bahawudin and Yangi Qala had been successfully cleared and that the ANSF would remain in control of the areas to ensure insurgents would not return.⁶⁷ After these announcements, the tempo of the ANSF operations slowed as the offensive was prematurely deemed successful and ended. Insurgents continued their assassination campaign and efforts to conduct high-profile attacks to demonstrate their continued presence in Takhar. On November 24th, a suspected suicide bomber attacked a public market in Khwaja Bahawudin.⁶⁸ This was followed by an assassination attempt on the chairman of the Takhar Provincial Council in Taloqan in early December.⁶⁹

By late December 2010, the ANSF began preparing for an offensive into Khwaja Ghar district to clear it of insurgents. Khwaja Ghar had largely been under the insurgency's control for two years and was considered by the ANSF to be the most insecure district in Takhar.⁷⁰ Khwaja Ghar is the most densely populated district in northwest Takhar, a sprawling agricultural district that runs contiguously with insurgent strongholds in Archi district of Kunduz. It is also a major crossroads for the northwest highway that runs west into Kunduz, north to Yangi Qala and southeast to Taloqan. As the ANSF moved into Khwaja Ghar in late December 2010, they engaged in heavy fighting with the Taliban across a number of villages along the highway.⁷¹ However, the ANSF quickly became hampered by its ineffective clearing operations in the previous months. For example, on December 31st, the ANSF assaulted and destroyed a well-defended insurgent training center in Khwaja Bahawudin, one of the districts declared cleared the previous month. Inside the center, security forces discovered a large cache of weapons, explosives and propaganda materials.⁷² Continued insurgent activity in those areas drew security forces away from the northwest by harassing lightly defended ANSF positions elsewhere in Taloqan and Farkhar.⁷³

The ANSF renewed its push into Khwaja Ghar in January 2011 after an operation had stalled there the previous month. Unlike the earlier operations in Takhar, however, the ANSF began implementing a reconciliation program for local insurgent commanders and rank-and-file fighters to surrender and hand over their arms in exchange for cash and promises of employment. These programs across the Northeast appear to have been conducted by General Daud, who personally negotiated with local insurgent commanders to join the government before ANSF offensives.⁷⁴ In a ceremony in early January 2011, Takhar Governor Abdul Jaban Taqwa praised the forty fighters who had surrendered in Darqad, Yangi Qala and Khwaja Bahawudin, promising them government positions and handing them cash.⁷⁵ Though the agreement marked an important development in the operation, the ANSF's arrangements with insurgents can prove flimsy and reconciled insurgents have been known to take up arms again if it is in their interest.⁷⁶

In late January 2011, ANSF began offensive operations in Khwaja Ghar after successfully negotiating with several insurgent commanders and their fighters who surrendered and turned over their weapons.⁷⁷ The ANSF operations in Khwaja Ghar focused on gaining control of the northwest highway by establishing new security checkpoints and clearing the area immediately surrounding the route—something ANSF had not done in the previous operations.⁷⁸ On January 25, 2011, U.S. Special Operations Forces conducted a raid in Khwaja Ghar, killing the Taliban commander for Darqad who was linked to al-Qaeda and the IMU and had been facilitating the movement of fighters, weapons, and drugs from Kunduz into Takhar.⁷⁹ This raid coincided with the ANSF clearing operations in the surrounding villages, during which the ANSF killed and arrested a number of militants and seized their arms caches.⁸⁰ Insurgents, unexpectedly, did not mount a strong resistance to the ANSF push into Khwaja Ghar. They were likely weakened due to the defections of low-level commanders and fighters, in addition to the casualties inflicted on their leadership by ISAF raids and airstrikes. The remaining insurgents, including a number of foreign fighters, reportedly fled to Ishkamish district in southern Takhar and into Baghlan province.⁸¹ By the end of January 2011, General Daud declared Khwaja Ghar cleared.⁸² Afghan Interior Minister General Bismullah Kahn Mohammadi visited Khwaja Ghar a few days later, where he touted the success of the ANSF operation and the reconciliation program.⁸³

The recent ANSF operations in Takhar appear to have been relatively effective in reducing the insurgency in the province's northwest. There are, however, significant challenges ahead in creating long-term stability in Takhar. The foremost threat to Takhar's security is the competition over the northwest smuggling routes through the province, which likely attracted the insurgency to Takhar in the first place and will continue to interest them. Yet, even after the ANSF pushed the insurgents out of northwest Takhar, the area has continued to be a major artery for smuggling drugs and weapons to Central Asia.⁸⁴ This is due to the systemic level of corruption within the province's security forces. The ANSF in Takhar have long been

direct participants in moving major shipments of opium, heroin, and other drugs over the Tajik border. In one such incident on February 27, 2011, Dashti Qala's police chief and two of his guards were arrested by federal counter-narcotics officers after fifteen kilograms of opium were discovered at the chief's residence in Yangi Qala.⁸⁵ Further, the competition over smuggling routes and profits has fueled rivalries amongst security commanders and local powerbrokers, degrading the overall operational effectiveness of the ANSF and exacerbating the insurgency.

The ANSF's drug smuggling in Takhar appears to be driven and protected by a nexus of local warlords, major trafficking networks, and influential malign actors in the Afghan government. The extensive corruption of the Afghan security forces in Takhar has only become more deeply entrenched by the recruitment of ALP and *arbakai* units. At least several of these auxiliary-police forces deputized by ISAF and the ANSF in Takhar have been drawn from the ranks of militias run by Takhar warlords with strong links to narcotics trafficking. The majority of the ALP's manpower in Darqad, for example, was provided from the private militia of Qazi Kabir Muzban.⁸⁶ Kabir, an ethnic Uzbek from Darqad, was a mujahedeen-era warlord turned influential Parliamentarian and a close ally in Kabul of President Hamid Karzai. Kabir's area of influence in Takhar extends from Darqad to Dashti Qala and he is suspected of being deeply involved in drug trafficking in this area. Through his political influence over local security forces and his private militia, he appears to have been running a protection-racket for various drug-mafias trafficking through northwest Takhar into Central Asia before the insurgents took control of the area in 2010. In the past, Kabir and General Daud (also widely suspected of drug trafficking⁸⁷) have even publicly accused one another of drug smuggling, after an incident when Daud's police arrested several of Kabir's men in Takhar.⁸⁸ Besides undermining the Afghan security forces, Kabir and his allies—who wield unrestrained power over locals—have stirred the insurgency by heightening the area's ethnic tensions. Kabir has frequently antagonized Takhar's Pashtun minority by seizing their land and distributing it to his Uzbek patrons,

a common grievance heard from rank-and-file Taliban fighters in the North.⁸⁹ The ties between ALP and *arbakai* and powerbrokers involved in the drug trade casts serious doubt on their credibility as local security force, as they appear to be a militia raised to recapture insurgent-held smuggling routes for their warlord benefactors, whose interests for the time being align with ISAF's counterinsurgency objectives.⁹⁰

SECURING BAGHLAN

ISAF and ANSF operations across Baghlan began in early November 2010 and continued into March 2011, with the objective of securing the two major highways that run through the province. These highways, originating in Kunduz (Route 2) and Balkh (Route A76), are major ISAF supply lines and are flanked by population centers in the northern half of the province. Route 2 runs along the Kunduz River valley through central Baghlan, a region spanning the districts of Baghlani Jadid and Pul-e Khumri. Route A76 is primarily located in Pul-e Khumri. The majority of Baghlan's 750,000 residents live along these highways, as much of the province beyond these river valleys is arid and mountainous.⁹¹ The population is over fifty percent Tajik, with a Pashtun minority of approximately twenty percent stretching from Dushi district in the south to Baghlan-e Jadid in the North. Finally, there is an Uzbek minority that forms twelve percent of the population.⁹²

ISAF and ANSF forces do not have a presence throughout the entire province, as Baghlan's large size and strategically important highways have necessitated a focus on securing restive areas near Route 2 and Route A76.⁹³ Recent operations in Baghlan reflect ISAF's strategic goal of maintaining freedom of movement on these highways. Baghlan became increasingly insecure in winter 2009 and spring 2010, as insurgents established themselves within the province and carried out attacks against government and civilian personnel.⁹⁴ In response, ISAF and ANSF launched several operations in the spring and summer of 2010 in the district of Baghlan-e Jadid.⁹⁵ In addition to operations related to highway security, ISAF and ANSF forces



MAP 8 | BAGHLAN PROVINCE

killed three successive Taliban shadow governors of Baghlan over a three-week span in April and May 2010.⁹⁶

Yet the gains from these operations were temporary at best and additional clearing operations began in Baghlan in early November 2010.⁹⁷ This push led by I-87, ANA, ANP, and *arbakai* supported by U.S. Special Operations Forces appeared to complement the October operations in Kunduz’s southern Aliabad district.⁹⁸ General Daud confirmed that the November operations in the Baghlan-e Jadid, which borders Aliabad to the north, sought to control the area near Route 2.⁹⁹ Beyond road security, ISAF pursued several leaders in the Baghlan-e Jadid, killing a senior Taliban commander and capturing a Haqqani network facilitator.¹⁰⁰ ISAF and ANA forces also cleared the area around Baghlan-e Markazi, a major population center in the district shortly thereafter.¹⁰¹ The joint forces killed and arrested numerous Taliban fighters and commanders, including the Taliban’s district commander for Baghlan-e Markazi.¹⁰²

The Taliban counterattacked in neighboring Borka district on November 20, 2010, briefly controlling the bazaar and part of the district center before being repulsed by ANP forces.¹⁰³ It is possible that

this was an attempt to secure an alternate route into the northern provinces, as ISAF had recently seized territory surrounding Route 2 in Baghlan-e Jadid. Borka borders both Kunduz and Takhar to the north, and there are a variety of secondary roads that lead from Borka district center into either northern province. News reports described Borka as largely controlled by the Taliban, and insurgents attacked the district center again in late January 2011.¹⁰⁴

ISAF and ANSF forces then proceeded southward, attacking insurgent strongholds between the districts of Pul-e Khumri and Dahana-i Ghor. Prior to the operation, the Baghlan governor described Pul-e Khumri as insecure, a description born out by the recent defeat of a local militia in Dahana-I Ghor at the hands of insurgents.¹⁰⁵ The operation was launched on December 14th and focused on Joi Naw, a village in close proximity to several main roads.¹⁰⁶ In the next two weeks, coalition and Afghan forces killed at least thirty insurgents in the area.¹⁰⁷ Afghan officials claimed that the operation was successfully concluded by December 26th and announced plans to build a series of joint ISAF-ANSF outposts in Dahana-i Ghor.¹⁰⁸

Substantial insurgent activity resumed in

Baghlan-e Markazi in early 2011, indicating that the November and December 2010 operations had not been decisive. Insurgents continued to attack government and security officials and conducted raids on police checkpoints throughout January and February.¹⁰⁹ Reports also indicated that insurgents continued to be sheltered by the population, either by choice or by coercion.¹¹⁰ This led to the launch of a second joint operation in Baghlan-e Markazi on February 20, 2011.¹¹¹ Over the course of the four-day operation, ANP and ANA units claimed to have cleared twenty villages and killed several fighters.¹¹²

In March 2011, the 170th Infantry Brigade Combat Team and ANSF forces intensified operations in Borka district, targeting insurgent leadership.¹¹³ The Taliban shadow governor of Borka was captured during a joint operation in early March while the commander of eighty insurgents was killed – alongside eleven of his fighters – the following day.¹¹⁴ Over the next two weeks, Afghan and coalition forces detained a number of insurgents in Borka in an attempt to prevent the area from being used as a staging ground.¹¹⁵ ISAF missions also specifically targeted IMU leaders within the district.¹¹⁶ This renewed offensive in Borka may be linked to the districts accessibility to Kunduz and Takhar provinces. Afghan government and ISAF officials have indicated that many insurgents fled south from these two provinces into Borka.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the Borka district governor stated that as many as one hundred hardened fighters are active within the province, including members of the Haqqani network and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.¹¹⁸ Statements by General Daud Daud indicate that fighting will continue in Borka, with new clearing operations set to begin soon.¹¹⁹

Baghlan's recent operations must be judged in light of the small allocation of forces and the need to secure the highway. There are too few ISAF and ANSF forces to project force throughout all of the problem districts in Baghlan, much less to definitively clear and hold them. Consequently, securing the highways remains a primary objective, as these roads are key lines of communication for both coalition forces and the Taliban. ISAF appears to control these highways, and coalition and Afghan forces are now conducting operations

to dismantle Taliban strongholds elsewhere in the province. While Pul-e Khumri is largely pacified, substantial fighting continues in Borka.¹²⁰ The small deployment of ISAF forces has prompted a reliance on ALP and *arbakai* units in this district, with many of these groups already facing accusations of corruption and abuse of power.¹²¹ The future of Baghlan is dependent on the efficacy of these groups in clearing insurgent strongholds and the continued ability for small contingents of ISAF forces to maintain control of the highways.

CONCLUSION

The recent operations (March 2010 to March 2011) in Kunduz, Baghlan, and Takhar were the first substantial efforts to clear insurgents from provinces in northeastern Afghanistan since violence began to escalate in the region in 2008. ISAF and ANSF expanded their presence to areas formerly controlled by insurgents, clearing safe havens and establishing checkpoints on key lines of communication. The Taliban and affiliated insurgent groups, notably the IMU, were prevented from more deeply entrenching within these districts. In Baghlan and Kunduz, the areas near the major highways were cleared and ISAF supply lines secured for the moment. These operations, conducted with a minimum of civilian casualties, have several secondary benefits as well. In the course of clearing villages throughout the region, crucial intelligence was gathered on enemy networks' operational patterns. Additionally, ISAF has achieved a psychological victory by demonstrating to these insurgent groups that sanctuaries in the Northeast are not safe from attack.

Despite the successes of these clearing operations, several districts in each province have not been decisively cleared. These areas include Archi and Khanabad districts in Kunduz, Khwaja Ghar in Takar, and Borka in Baghlan. The small number of ISAF forces prevent these regions from being included in recent operations and it is likely that ISAF and ANSF operations in neighboring areas have pushed militants into these districts. These shortcomings are due to ISAF's minimal allocation of forces to the Northeast, a direct result of the strategic focus on southern and eastern Afghanistan. While this strategy appropriately focuses ISAF and

ANSF forces in Afghanistan's primary conflict centers, it has led to an under-resourced effort in the North.

In addition to the limitations of these military operations, several problems have emerged that threaten northeastern Afghanistan's long-term stability. First, the extensive use of local militias in the form of *arbakai* and ALP units across the Northeast has potentially destabilizing implications. Once intended as local security forces for tribes in southern Afghanistan and other more far-flung areas, these militias have been used as frontline units in nearly every operation. In the Northeast the viability of these units as long-term security forces is highly questionable. They are poorly trained, notoriously undisciplined and their loyalty to the government is more often than not secured only by patronage with no corresponding ideological commitment. It has been widely reported that *arbakai* and ALP units have abused their power by robbing, extorting, and harassing locals—exactly the behavior that makes communities turn to the Taliban.¹²² Several *arbakai* units in northeastern Afghanistan have at times switched sides to fight for the insurgents and then switched back to the government.¹²³ Another factor is the ethnic distribution of militia forces: a large percentage of militias appear to be ethnic Uzbek and Tajik and it is possible—and if so, potentially problematic—that these *arbakai* and ALP units are securing ethnically Pashtun areas.¹²⁴

Another major issue is the failure to address narcotics smuggling perpetrated by criminal networks and malign government actors. Afghan and ISAF officials across the Northeast frequently refer to the insurgency and drug trafficking as interconnected—at times impossible to separate. It is likely that much of the violence along the highways and border crossings in Kunduz and Takhar revolve around control of the drug trade. Although the ANSF claim to have secured many of these areas, security forces have long been suspected of being complicit in cross-border trafficking. While recent operations may have denied this revenue stream to insurgents, extensive involvement of Afghan security forces in narcotics trafficking will likely perpetuate the malign governance that drives populations towards the Taliban.

Looking forward, several patterns are likely to emerge in Kunduz, Takhar, and Baghlan. The progress made by ISAF and ANSF forces, as well as the long-term viability of recent reconciliation efforts and the loyalties of *arbakai* units will be tested in the spring 2011 fighting season. The fighting in Kunduz will remain the focal point for the northern insurgency, with insurgents launching high profile suicide attacks on Afghan government and security forces. These attacks are not definitive representations of insurgent strength, but may further the perception of instability in the Northeast. Subsequent ISAF operations will be aimed at securing key supply routes and maintaining security gains in Kunduz and Baghlan. Security in Takhar will remain contingent on the strength of insurgents in Kunduz as well as the competition between the ANSF and insurgents for control of drug smuggling routes. ISAF's apparent long-term security solution, the ALP and *arbakai*, will likely serve the interests of their warlords at the expense of the population, provoking resentment that returning insurgent groups may use to regain a foothold in the region. Alternatively, these local forces may return to the insurgency if ISAF and ANSF forces lose momentum in the Northeast. Finally, the border crossings in Takhar and Kunduz will continue to be major narcotics trafficking hubs, enriching local warlords and corrupt government officials. In light of this, it is unlikely that long-term stability will return to the Northeast without a significant and ongoing ISAF presence, or the deployment of reliable ANSF forces.

NOTES

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¹⁴ Authors' correspondence with Colonel Kai Rohrschneider, January 14, 2011.

¹⁵ Authors' correspondence with Colonel Kai Rohrschneider, January 14, 2011.

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