

DECEMBER 2009

CARL FORSBERG

AFGHANISTAN REPORT 3

THE TALIBAN'S CAMPAIGN FOR KANDAHAR



INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY of WAR

MILITARY ANALYSIS AND EDUCATION
FOR CIVILIAN LEADERS

Front Cover Photograph: Afghan National Army commandos, from the 205th Kandak, and their special operations counterparts conduct a cordon and search of the Shawal Bazaar in Kandahar, Afghanistan, April 29, 2009, in order to disrupt a Taliban safe haven. After a search of the area, Afghani and coalition forces discovered 220 pounds of opium, 2,400 kilograms of ammonium nitrate, commonly used by militants to produce explosives, and numerous pressure plates. Photo Credit: Spc. Joseph Wilson, U.S. Army.

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Published in 2009 in the United States of America by the Institute for the Study of War.

1400 16th Street NW, Suite 515 Washington, DC 20036.

<http://www.understandingwar.org>

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FOR KANDAHAR**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- This paper describes the Quetta Shura Taliban's multi-year campaign to exert control over Kandahar City. Kandahar is the center of gravity of the Quetta Shura Taliban's efforts in Afghanistan. The paper demonstrates why Coalition forces have hitherto inadequately responded to the Taliban in Kandahar, and explains why ISAF will most likely allocate additional forces to the districts around Kandahar City in 2010.
 - The Quetta Shura Taliban has made Kandahar and its provincial capital, Kandahar City, primary objectives of their campaign in southern Afghanistan.
 - The Taliban has waged a campaign since 2004 with a clear and constant objective: to exert control over Kandahar City. To accomplish this objective, the Taliban sought to take control of the populated areas surrounding Kandahar City district by district.
 - The key districts surrounding Kandahar City are Zhari, Panjwai, Khakrez, Arghandab, and Dand.
 - The Taliban attempted to advance against Kandahar City in 2004 from their bases in Uruzgan, Zabul, and Shah Wali Kot. When they were checked by a battalion of U.S. forces, the Taliban worked to extend their lines of communication westward in 2005, to secure a major east-west route into northern Helmand in order to approach Kandahar City from the west.
 - The Taliban expanded their control of the Zhari and Panjwai districts, west of Kandahar City, in 2006 but ISAF prevented the Taliban from using these areas as a base for attacks on Kandahar City.
 - Canadian forces focused on fighting the Taliban for control of Zhari and Panjwai in 2007 and early 2008. This campaign ultimately developed into a costly stalemate, as the Canadians lacked the forces required to clear the Taliban from the area decisively.
 - While the Taliban continued to target the Canadians in Zhari and Panjwai in 2007 and 2008, they organized and conducted a campaign to advance on Kandahar City from the north.
 - The objective of this campaign was the Arghandab district, located just north of Kandahar City. Arghandab would be an ideal safehaven from which insurgents could project their power into the provincial capital.
 - Arghandab, however, was initially geographically defensible and politically hostile to the Taliban. The Arghandab district was the homeland of the Alokozai tribe, over which Mullah Naqib, the key Alokozai tribal leader, had exercised strong control since the 1980s. Mullah Naqib opposed Taliban rule after 2001. As long as Naqib's tribal commanders and their militias remained hostile to the Taliban, they posed a serious obstacle to any advance through the Arghandab district.
 - In preparation for their attack on Arghandab, the Taliban maneuvered into Khakrez district during the spring and summer of 2007. Control of Khakrez linked several key Taliban positions in western and northern Kandahar and allowed resources from each of these fronts to move into Arghandab district.
 - The Taliban launched their initial attack into Arghandab in October 2007, after the natural death of Mullah Naqib. This assault marked the beginning of an intense campaign to erode the will of the population in Arghandab to resist Taliban control.
 - The Taliban gained control of Arghandab by using targeted violence to intimidate local leaders, supplemented with an intimidation campaign and the implementation of a judicial system to increase the Taliban's legitimacy.
 - The Taliban had solidified their control of Arghandab and other key areas surrounding Kandahar City by late 2008, allowing them to project force into the provincial capital.

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- Establishing control over Arghandab and building support networks in the northern, western, and southwestern belts of Kandahar City dramatically increased the Taliban's ability to wage a campaign of intimidation and terror in Kandahar City in 2008 and 2009.
 - The Taliban have targeted key provincial government figures, pro-government mullahs, the Afghan National Security Forces, and NATO's International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF). In addition to attempting to destroy the Afghan government in Kandahar, the Taliban have waged a parallel campaign to exert control over the lives of Kandahar's citizens through intimidation and shadow governance structures.
- ISAF failed to prioritize the province over Helmand, despite the importance of Kandahar. ISAF also made poor decisions on where to position its forces within the province, including the reluctance to position sufficient coalition forces inside Kandahar City. The Taliban, therefore, met minimal ISAF resistance as it expanded its control over Kandahar City and its suburbs in 2008 and 2009.
 - ISAF under the command of General McKiernan focused its resources in southern Afghanistan in 2008 and 2009 on fighting in Helmand and border interdiction in Spin Boldak and Barham Chah.
 - General Stanley McChrystal arrived too late in the spring of 2009 fundamentally to change General McKiernan's campaign plan and force allocations for the summer season. As a result, Helmand remained the priority.
 - The battalion of U.S. forces now fighting in Arghandab is insufficient to reverse the Taliban's entrenched control over the strategically critical Arghandab district in the time available.
 - ISAF has only been disrupting the Taliban in Kandahar, largely on account of resource constraints. This approach is flawed, as constant disruption cannot get ISAF closer to an endstate of the prolonged, if not permanent, reduction of Taliban violence and intimidation necessary to prevent the insurgency from having a strategic, delegitimizing effect on the government of Afghanistan.
 - ISAF's task in Kandahar must be to reverse the Taliban's momentum, eliminate its sanctuaries around Kandahar City, and neutralize its capabilities to attack Kandahar.
 - Removing the Taliban sanctuaries in turn necessitates a properly-resourced counterinsurgency campaign that is supported by simultaneous and mutually supporting operations throughout Kandahar Province and some of Helmand.
 - Defeating the Taliban – or at least neutralizing and selectively destroying it – requires more Coalition and Afghan forces in Kandahar Province.
 - Success depends not only on the number of troops but also on the intelligent application of counterinsurgency strategy and a proper understanding of enemy strategy.
 - The current distribution of ISAF units in Kandahar must be adjusted to achieve the force densities needed to neutralize or defeat the Taliban. Arghandab and the suburbs of Kandahar City must be prioritized over areas of secondary strategic significance.
 - If ISAF does not generate sufficient force densities in critical areas, its attempted counteroffensive will fail, giving enemy fighters a permissive environment and allowing the Taliban's campaign of terror to continue in Kandahar City.
 - Insufficiently resourcing the fight in Arghandab and the suburbs of Kandahar risks the same sort of failure that ISAF experienced during its campaign in Zhari and Panjwai in 2007 and 2008.
 - Destroying the insurgents in Kandahar is a critical and necessary first step for reversing the Taliban's gains across southern Afghanistan and neutralizing their effects on the entire country.

THE TALIBAN'S CAMPAIGN FOR KANDAHAR

By Carl Forsberg

INTRODUCTION

The Quetta Shura Taliban has made Kandahar province and its capital, Kandahar City, primary objectives of their campaign in southern Afghanistan. Kandahar is also the birthplace of the Taliban movement, and the historical powerbase of the family of Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Despite the importance of Kandahar, NATO's International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) has until very recently failed to prioritize the province and to grasp the Taliban's campaign plan to take Kandahar City. General McChrystal rightly called attention to Kandahar City in his August 30, 2009 Commander's Initial Assessment, which was subsequently published by the Washington Post.¹

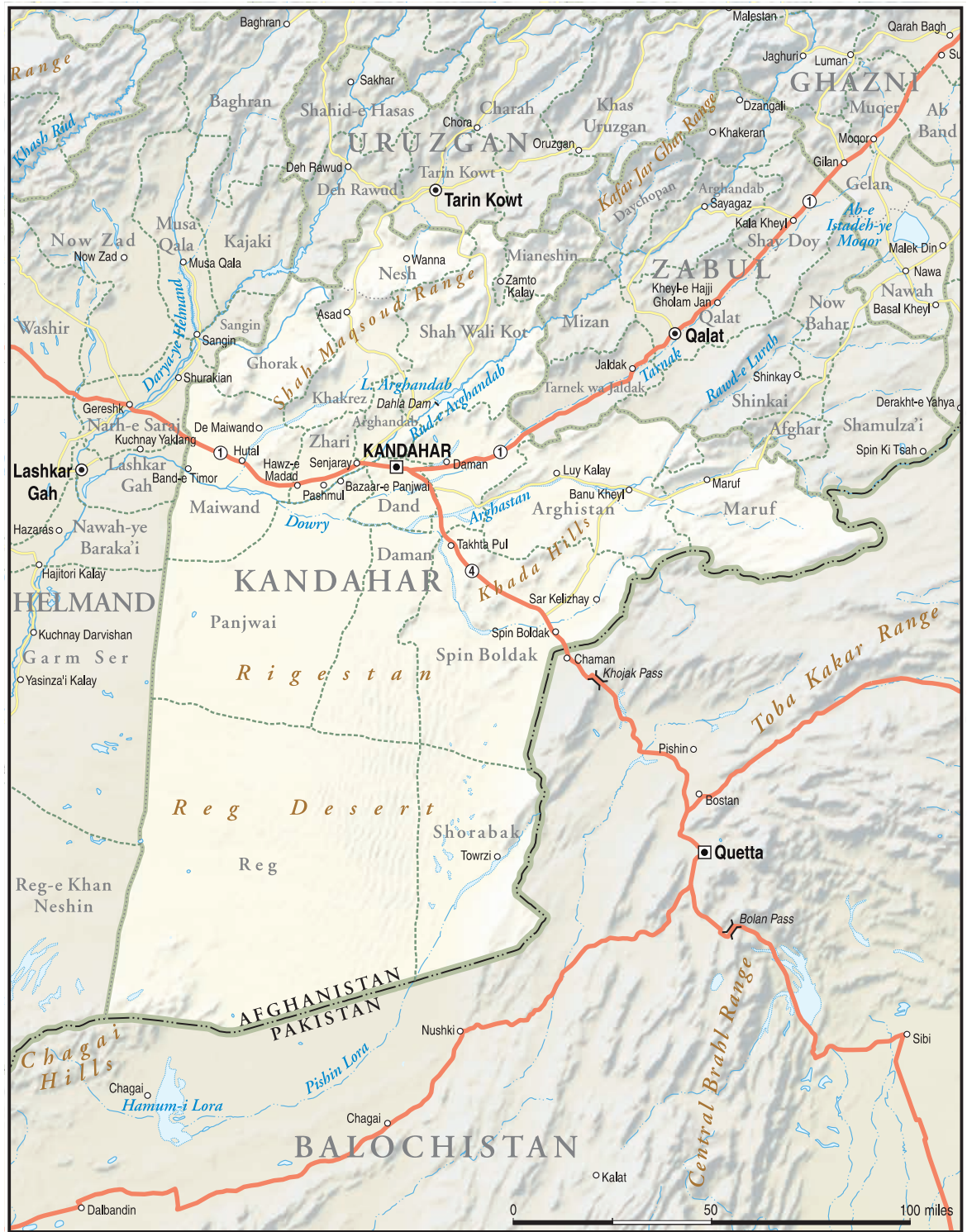
The Taliban have expanded and then entrenched their control over Kandahar province since 2005. By 2008, the insurgents had established a significant presence in Kandahar City. If the Quetta Shura Taliban's influence in southern Afghanistan is to be reversed, ISAF must defeat the Taliban in key areas of Kandahar province, namely Kandahar City and the populated areas that surround it. More importantly, while the situation in Kandahar is serious, ISAF can neutralize and defeat the Taliban with a properly resourced counterinsurgency executed in areas of key importance to the enemy system.

This report details the Taliban's campaign to take Kandahar City and the factors that allowed the insurgency to exert considerable influence over the city by 2009. The report begins by evaluating the geography, tribal structures, and political history that set the conditions for the Taliban's post-2001 campaign to retake Kandahar City. The second section lays out the Taliban's strategy for taking Kandahar, evaluating the campaigns and operations that allowed the Taliban to contest the populated areas surrounding Kandahar City by the summer of 2008. This analysis reveals both the capabilities and the techniques of the Taliban. Since 2008, the Taliban's entrenchment in Kandahar City's suburbs has allowed the insurgency

to project violence into the city. The third section of this paper analyzes how the enemy system has employed violence to establish its influence over Kandahar City and why ISAF operations through the fall of 2009 have been unable to secure the province. The report concludes by evaluating what is required to break the Taliban's control in Kandahar. The analysis underscores the dangers of under-resourcing counterinsurgency operations.

KANDAHAR'S GEOGRAPHIC AND HUMAN TERRAIN

Kandahar Province is a strategic keystone for Afghanistan. The province sits between the southern tip of the Hindu Kush Mountains in central Afghanistan and the Registan Desert which forms the country's southern border. Kandahar sits at the intersection of vital lines of communication across the country, and those traveling between western and eastern Afghanistan as well as from Pakistan must pass through the province. From Kandahar, one can reach Herat to the northwest or Kabul to the northeast via the broad highway, Highway One, which arches between Herat and Kabul and passes through Kandahar City. In addition, the road into Afghanistan from Quetta, Pakistan intersects the Herat-Kabul highway at



MAP 1 | KANDAHAR PROVINCE

Kandahar City. The road from Kandahar to Quetta, passing through the Khojak Pass on the Afghan-Pakistan border, is, along with the Khyber Pass, one of two primary routes between the countries.²

Kandahar Province consists of four major geographic zones. In the far south, the province is defined by the Reg Desert. Most of the desert is uninhabited and covered by towering sand dunes roughly 200-500 feet high.³ On the eastern edge of the desert, along Kandahar's border with Pakistan, the inhospitable sand desert gives way to a ten-mile-wide tract of flat scrubland that runs north to south and is inhabited by nomads.⁴

In Kandahar's north, the landscape is shaped by a series of rugged hills and mountains. The population in the Shah Wali Kot and Mianeshin districts lives primarily along the Arghandab River and a number of tributaries that cut through the northern mountains.⁵ The strategically important road linking Kandahar with Tarin Kot, the capital of Uruzgan province, runs through this district. West of Shah Wali Kot and north of Arghandab is the broad Khakrez valley. Khakrez is separated from the Arghandab River Valley by a range of hills. To the northwest, the Shah Maqsud range rises some 3,000 feet above the Khakrez plain and separates it from the Ghorak River valley further to the northwest. The Ghorak valley extends into the Sangin district in Helmand province and is also connected to the Maiwand district to its south by a wide pass. The Nesh district, which was a part of Uruzgan province until 2004, sits in a basin to the north of Khakrez and Ghorak, separated from them and from Uruzgan province to its north by several chains of hills.⁶ A series of interconnected valleys and mountain passes run east-west along the northern edge of Shah Wali Kot and Khakrez districts, connecting Kandahar's northern districts to each other and to Uruzgan and Helmand provinces.

In the far east of the province are the Maruf and Arghastan districts. Maruf is separated from the rest of Kandahar province by a long range of mountains that extends southwest from Zabul to form the boundary between Afghanistan

and Pakistan. The Arghastan River cuts a valley through these mountains before descending onto a plain in the Arghastan district, eventually passing the Kandahar Airfield before joining the Dowry and Arghandab Rivers. This plain to the east of Kandahar City is mostly scrubland, though the Arghastan River supports some small farms and villages.⁷

The vast majority of Kandahar's population lives in the wide plain in the center of the province irrigated by the Arghandab River. Kandahar City sits in the middle of this plain, and is bordered by several massive but narrow rock outcroppings which tower hundreds of feet over the city.⁸ Bordering Kandahar City to the northeast is the Arghandab district, a thin strip of irrigated farmland stretching south from Lake Dahla. Lake Dahla is a key reservoir for the province's irrigation systems. It is formed by the Dahla Dam, built by the United States in the 1950s.⁹ Water in the Arghandab district is supplied by a series of irrigation canals that support dense orchards and vineyards renowned for their pomegranates, melons, dates, and nuts. As the Arghandab River flows west, it enters the Zhari and Panjwai districts, which are also heavily irrigated, but the vegetation lacks the thick tree cover found in Arghandab. Because wood is too scarce for tresses, rows of earthen mounds used by Afghan vine-growers to elevate their vines are a distinctive feature of the landscape in Panjwai and Zhari. The Arghandab meets the Dowry River in the Panjwai district and then flows into Maiwand, where the terrain is less irrigated and settlements are spread further apart.¹⁰ The majority of Kandahar's poppy crop is grown in the Panjwai, Zhari, and Maiwand districts.¹¹ To the south and southeast of Kandahar City, farther from the Arghandab River, the plain widens but becomes less fertile and more sparsely inhabited.¹² It is interrupted by hills as it stretches along the Kadanai River to the border town of Spin Boldak. Spin Boldak and Kandahar City are linked by a paved highway. The Kandahar Airfield, the main ISAF base in the province, sits twelve miles southwest of Kandahar City along this vital route.

The terrain surrounding Kandahar has shaped the military history of the region. While history is not necessarily a guide for the present, physical geography changes little over time. Conventional armies have approached Kandahar along the main road from Kabul to Herat, either from the east or west, and have also approached the city from Pakistan through Spin Boldak to the southwest.¹³ The densely cultivated and irrigated terrain that surrounds Kandahar City to the northwest, west, and southwest, as well as the hills in the northern part of the province, have been used by insurgent groups as a staging area for attacks on Kandahar City. During the anti-Soviet jihad, the mujahideen's major bases for infiltration of Kandahar City were in the Arghandab and Panjwai districts, and the Malajat area of Dand district; these bases were supported by positions in the hills of northern Kandahar and Uruzgan.¹⁴ As this paper will demonstrate, the Taliban has contested this same strategically important physical terrain in recent years.

The history of southern Afghanistan has long been shaped by the rivalry between two Pashtun subtribes, the Ghilzai and the Durrani. Prior to the eighteenth century, Kandahar was dominated by the Ghilzai Pashtun. But in the 1730s, Durrani Pashtun tribes allied with the Persian king Nadir Shah, who seized Kandahar from the Hotaki Ghilzai dynasty in 1738.¹⁵ The Durrani subtribes settled in Kandahar, claiming the province's best land and subordinating the once powerful Ghilzai.¹⁶ The power and prestige of the Durrani rose even further under Ahmad Shah Durrani, a member of the tribes' Popolzai clan, who unified the Durrani in 1747 and led them on a series of military campaigns across Afghanistan.¹⁷ The modern Afghan state was born from Shah Ahmad's campaigns and was at its inception, essentially an empire ruled by Durrani from Kandahar. For the next 200 years, until the last Shah was deposed in 1973, Afghanistan was ruled by Durrani kings who were from Kandahar.¹⁸ Since the 1980s two more governments – the Taliban and the Karzai government – have also had their roots in Kandahar province.

Kandahar province's population is estimated to be 913,900,¹⁹ but massive population displacement in Kandahar makes it difficult to quantify the population's distribution across the province. In 2004, the estimated population of Kandahar City was 323,900, with another 144,300 individuals living in suburbs in the Dand district.²⁰ The population of Kandahar city has swelled over the last five years, as many have fled the insurgency in rural Kandahar settling instead in Kandahar City.²¹ Brigadier General Jon Vance, the commander of Canadian forces in Kandahar for much of 2009, has suggested that up to eighty-five percent of Kandahar's population may now live in Kandahar City and its suburbs, and other sources estimate that the city's population is nearing one million.²² According to 2004 estimates, another 250,000 Afghans lived in the Arghandab River Valley in the Arghandab, Panjwai, and Zhari districts, approximately 100,000 lived in the northern districts of Shah Wali Kot, Khakrez, Ghorak, Mianeshin and Nesh.²³ These districts have suffered greatly from the insurgency in recent years, and their 2009 population figures are likely lower.²⁴ The 2004 population survey estimated that another 40,000 Afghans lived in the Spin Boldak district, 10,000 lived in the desert Shorabak and Reg districts, and some 55,000 lived in the mountains of Maruf and Arghastan.²⁵

The majority of Kandahar's population belongs to one of the Durrani tribes, and a tribal hierarchy has emerged within the Durrani over the last several hundred years. The elite Durrani tribes were those belonging to what became known as the Zirak Durrani confederation. The Zirak Durrani included the Popolzai, Barakzai, Achakzai and Alokozai tribes.²⁶ The royal family came first from the Popolzai tribe and then, after 1842, from the Barakzai tribe, making these the most powerful tribes in Kandahar.²⁷ The Popolzai tribe has produced a number of Afghanistan's leading politicians, including the Karzai family. In Kandahar, Popolzai tribal strongholds are in the areas surrounding Kandahar City and in the hills of the Shah Wali Kot, Nesh, and Ghorak districts.²⁸ These northern districts have mixed populations, but the Popolzai are often the largest landholders.²⁹ The Barakzai tribe, with its strong connec-

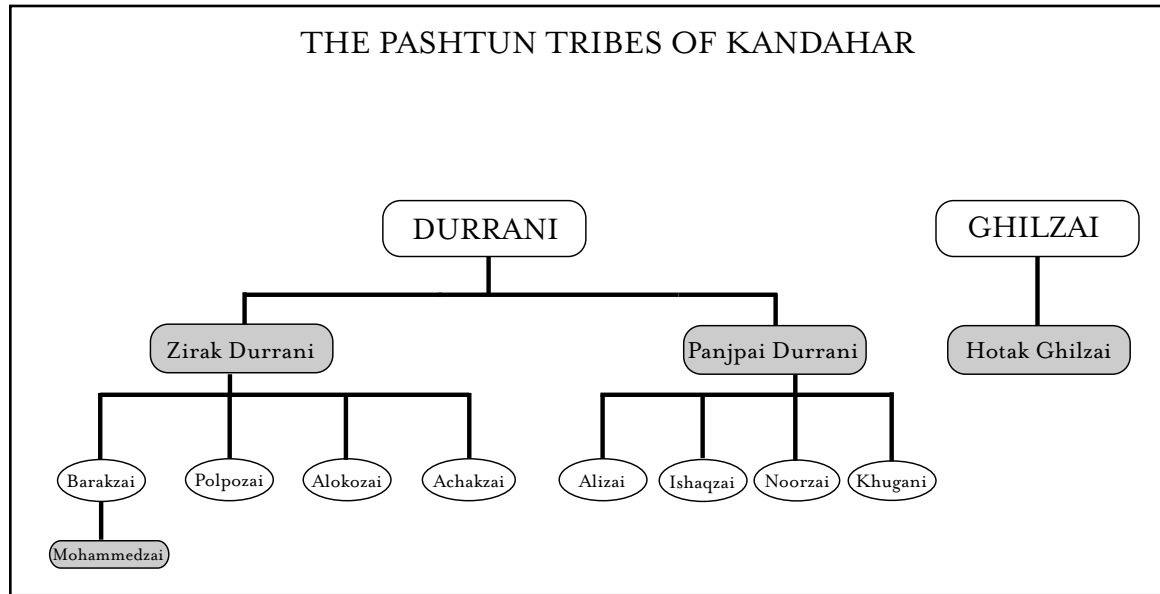


CHART 1 | THE PASHTUN TRIBES OF KANDAHAR

tions to the monarchy, is one of the most urban, wealthy, and progressive of Kandahar’s tribes, and its members make up much of Kandahar’s merchant community.³⁰ The largest Barakzai enclaves are found in the villages of the Dand and Daman districts, to the south and west of Kandahar City.³¹ There is also a substantial Barakzai population in the mountains of the Maruf district, where the traditional Barakzai tribal structure remains more firmly intact.³²

The Alokozai tribe dominates the fertile Arghandab district bordering Kandahar City, and there are also Alokozai communities in the hills of Khakrez and Shah Wali Kot.³³ The Alokozai have historically had less national influence and fewer international connections, but have retained a reputation as fierce warriors.³⁴ The Achakzai tribe inhabits the plains of Spin Boldak, and also has enclaves in Panjwai.³⁵ The tribe’s location along the main transit points between Afghanistan and Pakistan gives them control of trade routes between the two countries, and they have developed a reputation for vigorously defending their smuggling routes.³⁶ The tribe was historically part of the Barakzai, with which it retains a close affinity, and it has remained supportive of the national government so long as the tribal leadership retains a role in managing customs and cross-border

transit.³⁷

The Durrani tribes are generally split into two groupings, one of which is the Zirak Durrani discussed above. The second grouping of Durrani tribes is the Panjpai Durrani. These tribes of the latter grouping historically played a subordinate role in the Durrani confederation, had less of a stake in the Durrani monarchy, and are considered by some Zirak Durrani to have been incorporated into the tribe in the eighteenth century.³⁸ The Panjpai Durrani tribes - the Noorzai, Alizai, and Ishaqzai - are largely based in the rural districts of Zhari, Panjwai, and Maiwand.³⁹ There are also Alizai and Ishaqzai tribal enclaves dispersed throughout the hills of Ghorak, Khakrez, and Shah Wali Kot. The Noorzai and Ishaqzai are generally less affluent than the Zirak Durrani, and are more likely to work as laborers or tenant farmers on large estates in the agricultural belt along the Arghandab River.⁴⁰ The Noorzai have had a long standing rivalry with the Achakzai tribe, as they compete over land in Panjwai district and for smuggling routes.⁴¹ Their distance from the city, conservative social norms, and subtle antagonism with the Zirak Durrani made them sympathetic to the Taliban, and a large number of senior Taliban commanders come from their ranks.⁴²

In Kandahar there are also sizeable minorities of the Ghilzai tribe, the historic rivals of the Durrani. The Ghilzai heartland is now in neighboring Zabul Province, but there are significant enclaves of Ghilzai in the remote valleys of Shah Wali Kot District.⁴³ In addition, many Ghilzai remain in agricultural areas of Panjwai and Zhari, continuing as small landholders or farm-hands, despite the transfer of much of their land to the Durrani tribes from the eighteenth century to the present.⁴⁴ Mullah Omar, leader of the Quetta Shura Taliban, comes from one of the less affluent Hotak Ghilzai families in rural Zhari district, and the conservative social norms of the Taliban movement reflect the culture of this long-marginalized social group.⁴⁵ Though these groups retain more conservative social norms, their tribal hierarchies are also more eroded in areas like Panjwai and Zhari where the Durrani leadership had laid claim to much of the land, which may help explain the relative social importance of the clergy amongst these groups of Ghilzai.⁴⁶

A final demographic in Kandahar is a small population of nomadic, non-Pashtun, Baluch and Barech tribesmen who migrate through the scarcely populated southern districts of Shorabak and Reg.⁴⁷

Tribal divides, however, are not always the most important distinctions to be drawn in Kandahar, as the tribes are certainly not monolithic entities. Perhaps a more useful distinction than that between Zirak Durrani tribal hierarchy and the Panjwai Durrani and Ghilzai groups, is the social divide between rural Kandahar and Kandahar City.⁴⁸ This divide overlaps some with tribal distinction, because the Zirak Durrani tribes did benefit more from their affiliation with the Afghan monarchy, but leadership in each tribe can be highly fractured. There are many Popalzai and Barakzai alienated from their own tribal elites, just as there are Noorzai and Ghilzai who are cosmopolitan and well-integrated into the Afghan elite.⁴⁹ Tribal affiliation in Kandahar City is weaker than in the countryside, and Kandahar City has also been home to groups of non-Pashtun Persian speaking Hazaras and Tajiks (the latter are called Farsiwani in Kandahar) and Uzbeks.⁵⁰

Kandahar is home to several small political parties and a nascent civil society.⁵¹ This demographic is small, however, as only thirteen percent of the population in Kandahar province is literate.⁵² Tribally-based networks do, however, remain an important political force in Kandahar and since 2001 tribally-based cartels have gained considerable power over the city's two dominant sources of revenue: contracts from foreign organizations and the opium trade.⁵³

THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF KANDAHAR: 1980-2001

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Kandahar's Durrani tribal aristocracy grew increasingly distanced from the population of Kandahar. Durrani tribal leaders gained key posts in the Kabul government, which served as the basis of their standing within their clans. Their sons often received Western educations, and Afghanistan's diplomatic corps was drawn from this class. President Hamid Karzai came from one of these prominent Durrani families. His father, Abdul Ahad Karzai, was both Deputy Speaker of the National Parliament and chief of the Popalzai clan. But when the communist Khalq party seized control of the Afghan government in 1978, the traditional Durrani aristocracy did little to oppose them.⁵⁴ Many of these aristocrats, including the Karzai family, fled abroad.⁵⁵ They had already grown far more attached to the state than to their tribal constituency, and when they lost power in Kabul, their influence in Kandahar declined.⁵⁶

The educated tribal aristocracy in Kandahar was supplanted in the 1980s by a new set of commanders who led the mujahideen, the broad-based Afghan guerilla movement which arose in response to the Soviet invasion in December 1979.⁵⁷ A minor tribal figure named Abdul Latif assumed control of the Barakzai tribe with the support of a violent gang of young fighters known as the Payluch. Upon Latif's assassination in 1989, leadership fell to his son, Gul Agha Sherzai.⁵⁸ With the Karzai family in exile abroad, mujahideen commander Amir Lalai replaced the Karzais as leaders of the Popalzai. The

Wasifi family, which had long led the Alokozai, was replaced by the famous mujahideen commander Mullah Naqibullah (or Mullah Naqib).⁵⁹ But unlike other areas of Afghanistan, in which the anti-Soviet jihad weakened the tribes, tribal identity remained strong in Kandahar. Mujahideen groups in Kandahar were tribally-based, and strong political parties or Islamists fronts did not emerge in the south.⁶⁰ Tellingly, the key tribes in Kandahar each aligned with different mujahideen parties, though these affiliations were largely nominal, and this ensured that each tribe maintained its autonomy.⁶¹ The inability of Kandahar's major tribes to work in close cooperation, to be unified by common political movements or to form parties which transcended tribal interests remained important trends in Kandahari politics after 2001.⁶²

After the Soviet withdrawal, power remained in the hands of senior mujahideen commanders and their tribal militias. The victorious mujahideen formed a loose confederation and divided up provincial offices. Instead of fighting one another, the mujahideen leaders turned to consolidating their recently acquired power over their own tribes.⁶³ Their militias took to extortion against their fellow tribesmen and set up hundreds of checkpoints on Kandahar's roads.⁶⁴ Tribal leadership became increasingly based on the use of force, and the mujahideen commanders were much rougher and uninhibited in their use of force against their own tribesmen.⁶⁵

The Taliban gained power in Kandahar in 1994 because of the failure of mujahideen commanders to govern well. Even before the Taliban emerged as a dominant force, the clergy played a role in addressing the failings of the mujahideen-era leadership. In the absence of a strong central government, the clergy played a key role in mediating disputes between the tribes during the anti-Soviet jihad.⁶⁶ During this time, senior tribally-based mujahideen commanders in Kandahar agreed to

establish a judicial committee of senior Islamic scholars to resolve disputes.⁶⁷ This senior Islamic Court was "independent of any of the Resistance political parties and had the final authority on all political-military-judicial matters."⁶⁸ These clerics benefited from their close ties to the population and had "a more widespread basis of legitimacy" than Kandahar's militia commanders.⁶⁹ The clerics who formed the Taliban likewise had a concrete connection to the large sections of the population in Kandahar alienated from their leadership, and the Taliban rose to power as a popularly supported clerical response to these tribal strongmen. In the conservative agrarian Panjwai district west of Kandahar City, Mullah Omar, a young mullah from humble origins with a reputation for piety, raised a militia of *taliban*,

or seminary students, to liberate two girls from a predatory local warlord in the summer of 1994.⁷⁰ The Taliban professed limited aims at their inception, promising to wipe out corruption, provide security, and establish a fair judiciary based on sharia (Islamic law). The Taliban's dramatic demonstrations and noble promises convinced

many that Omar and his followers were committed to good governance and could provide relief from the oppression and extortion of local strongmen. Strong discipline and unity of purpose, a surge of recruits from Pakistani seminaries, and the support of the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) directorate gave the Taliban a clear military advantage over the fractured local warlords, who disbanded their militias and fled without a fight in October 1994.⁷¹

The Taliban's consolidation of power in Kandahar was aided by their alliances with two key local powerbrokers in the province that opted to work with the Taliban rather than resist them. The first local ally was Bashir Noorzai, the powerful head of the Noorzai tribe in Maiwand and the head of a major narcotics cartel.⁷² Noorzai developed a mutually-beneficial relationship with the Taliban

The Taliban gained power in Kandahar in 1994 because of the failure of mujahideen commanders to govern well.

government, serving as a key financier for the movement in exchange for Taliban support of his business interests.⁷³ A second key partner of the Taliban government was Mullah Naqib (Naqibullah), the head of the powerful Alokozai tribe. Mullah Naqib declined to resist the Taliban when they moved on Kandahar in October 1994.⁷⁴ The Taliban subsequently allowed him to stay in Kandahar and retain leadership of his tribe. When a number of Alokozai commanders grew increasingly dissatisfied with the Taliban in the late 1990s Naqib prevented the tribe from rising in armed insurrection.⁷⁵

Whereas in much of Afghanistan the Taliban ruled through force and the manipulation of tribal and sectarian divisions in the absence of popular support,⁷⁶ in Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Zabul, the Taliban government was initially welcomed by the population.⁷⁷ The Taliban replaced the rapacious rule of local strongmen by rigorously applying sharia law, which was straightforward and transparent to the people of Kandahar.⁷⁸ As the Taliban conquered the rest of Afghanistan, they also returned Kandahar to a position of unrivaled power and influence throughout the country.⁷⁹ The Taliban leadership was dominated by Kandaharis, and this did not change even after most of the country fell to the movement. Six of ten men on the Taliban's Supreme Shura were Durrani Pashtuns, and several others, including Mullah Omar himself, were Ghilzais from Kandahar.⁸⁰ The Taliban's ruling shura, or council, in Kandahar dictated commands to the majority Kandahari government in Kabul, and Kandaharis dominated the military, police, and civil service throughout Afghanistan.⁸¹

While most of Afghanistan suffered economically from Taliban rule, Kandahar benefited. The Taliban removed roadblocks and ended the exorbitant tolls collected by militias, winning the support of Kandahar's influential merchant community.⁸² Until 2000, the mullahs encouraged and protected the opium trade, which won them considerable support in Kandahar's agricultural districts.⁸³ With its newfound political power and the booming opium trade, reconstruction progressed in Kandahar more than anywhere else

in Afghanistan.⁸⁴

The Taliban's leadership aspired in principle to transcend tribalism, and did have some success in incorporating elements of many tribes into the movement.⁸⁵ Some Taliban leaders came from the Popolzai, Alokozai and Achakzai tribes, but many came from the poorer and historically weaker Noorzai and Hotak tribes.⁸⁶ The Taliban's cultural program, which involved banning public entertainment and demanding the total seclusion of women, can be seen as an attempt to impose the austere lifestyle of these poorer, more conservative rural groups onto Kandahar's urban population.⁸⁷ The antagonism between Kandahar's agrarian and conservative population and the more urban population and the Kabul-connected Zirak Durrani leadership class continues to define a major cultural gap between pro- and anti-Taliban sections of Kandahar's population.⁸⁸

By 2001, the population of Kandahar City had grown weary of Taliban control. Conscription for the long and costly war against the Northern Alliance provoked resentment in Kandahar.⁸⁹ The Taliban's puritanical bans on public entertainment and recreation went too far, and even conservative Kandaharis resented having this extremely austere lifestyle forced upon them.⁹⁰ The Taliban's senior leadership also became an increasingly exclusive and foreign-influenced clique, rather than a grassroots movement, even though its leadership was still Kandahari.⁹¹ As a sign of growing dissatisfaction with the Taliban regime, several Kandahari villages revolted against the Taliban in 1997, killing four recruiters.⁹² The Taliban attempted to control these dissident communities by cutting off their water supply.⁹³

POLITICS, MILITIAS, AND THE EROSION OF INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE TO THE TALIBAN: 2001-2005

Kandahari political dynamics have set the conditions under which the Taliban have reasserted control over Kandahar since 2001. Politics in Kandahar have worked to empower several small, often competing networks of Zirak Durrani elites, who have attempted to expand their influence in

the province at the cost and exclusion of both elements of their own tribes and the Panjpai Durrani and Ghilzai tribes. The dynamic has led several excluded groups to support the Taliban movement.

In the fall of 2001, the decisive victories of the United States and its proxies in northern Afghanistan made it clear the Taliban's forces in Kandahar could not resist a U.S. attack. In Kandahar, the United States worked with two proxies. On the Pakistani border, Gul Agha Sherzai reconstituted his Barakzai militia with support from both the United States and the ISI.⁹⁴ In Uruzgan, Hamid Karzai rallied Popolzai tribesmen to his side and advanced south with U.S. Special Forces.⁹⁵ On December 8, 2001, Kandahar City fell to this alliance of Popolzai, Barakzai, and Alokozai militias. The Alokozai chieftain, Mullah Naqib, whose tacit support had been critical to the Taliban's control over Kandahar, supported Karzai and acted as a key conduit for negotiating the Taliban's surrender.⁹⁶ Mullah Naqib's decision to cooperate with Karzai and Sherzai was critical to the collapse of Taliban power in Kandahar.⁹⁷ The Taliban's other key local ally in Kandahar, Bashir Noorzai, also stood by as the Taliban collapsed, although unlike Naqib, he was alienated from the new administration and within a year was driven to Quetta, where he resumed financial support of the Taliban.⁹⁸

When the Taliban regime fell in 2001, Kandahar City came back to life and the population anticipated an influx of foreign economic aid.⁹⁹ Sentiments in the countryside, where the Taliban's strict social mores were not unusual, were more ambiguous. Small villages in conservative areas like Panjwai and Maiwand reportedly harbored key Taliban leaders as they fled Kandahar City.¹⁰⁰

Thus, in 2001, a collection of tribal strongmen returned to power in Kandahar, with leadership of the Zirk Durrani tribes running the provincial administration.¹⁰¹ Hamid Karzai, named interim President by Afghan and international envoys that met in Bonn, Germany, sought to shore up his government by forming a coalition of the Zirk Durrani sub-tribes. In doing so, he imitated the

methods of rule used by the Durrani kings, for whom Karzai's family had long served as advisors and politicians. Tribalism once again asserted itself as a dominant force in Kandahari politics. Within the tribes, an uneasy relationship existed between the westernized Durrani aristocracy, who returned after the fall of the Taliban, and the strongmen who had filled their places during the mujahideen era.¹⁰² The strongmen had their militias, but those who had been exiled in the West were better able to win the backing of the foreign governments sponsoring the interim administration in Kabul. In Kandahar, the returning tribal notables included the Karzai family (the most prominent of whom were brothers Hamid, Qayum, Mahmoud, and Ahmed Wali), as well as figures like Izzatullah Wasifi, heir to the Alokozai leadership, and Kandahar's new mayor, Abdullah Popal, who had been Afghanistan's ambassador to the United Nations (UN) in the 1970s and was a long-time resident of San-Francisco.¹⁰³

Yet, with the exception of the Karzai family, the returned aristocracy soon found it had little power in Kandahar. The real power-brokers remained the tribally-based strongmen who had consolidated their rule during the turbulent 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰⁴ The Karzai family retained relevance in Kandahar because of President Hamid Karzai's influence over the institutions of the state; however, it took time for the Karzai family to consolidate power. From 2001-2004, the Karzais influence was limited even over their Popolzai tribe, and the family had to compete for power against former mujahideen commander Amir Lalai.¹⁰⁵ Without a strong tribal power base in Kandahar, Karzai had to accommodate the strongmen.¹⁰⁶ Gul Agha Sherzai was made governor and his network within the Barakzai tribe thus took the leading role in the new Kandahar provincial administration.¹⁰⁷ Though Sherzai's tribal militia was weaker than the Alokozai militia, Sherzai had the backing of the CIA and U.S. Special Forces operating in Kandahar.¹⁰⁸ U.S. support strengthened Sherzai's hand tremendously, and the provincial government was dominated by Barakzai appointments from 2001 to 2005.¹⁰⁹

Karzai's tribal allies, however, were mostly accommodated not by integration into the civil government, but by incorporation into the Afghan Security Forces, which, in reality, was a group of tribal militias. Had these militias been thoroughly reformed, disciplined, and been directed to serve the interests of the people of Kandahar rather than the interests of the strongmen who led them, they could have been an effective way to provide security for Kandahar. But most of these tribal militias used their power primarily to further the narrow interests of their commanders.

Many of the militias in Kandahar were incorporated into the 2nd Corps of the Afghan military, which was composed almost exclusively of local units. Command of the unit was given to Khan Mohammad, who had long served as military commander of the Alokozai militias.¹¹⁰ Khan Mohammad was a deputy of Mullah Naqib, the powerful chieftain of the Alokozai tribe. Naqib was sidelined from Kandahari politics after 2001 because of his tacit support of the Taliban during the 1990s, but would remain the unifying figure within his tribe until his death in 2007.¹¹¹ The militia of Amir Lalai, one of Karzai's rivals within his own Popolzai tribe, was integrated into the 15th Division of the 2nd Corps.¹¹² Karzai's faction of the Popolzai was given the 466 Airborne Brigade. Sherzai's Barakzai militia was integrated into the *Nazmi Khas* (Special Order) unit assigned to Kandahar Airfield, where it was able to profit from lucrative contracts with international forces.¹¹³ Additional Barakzai units existed within the 2nd Corps.¹¹⁴ The Alizai militia of Habibullah Jan was integrated into the 530 Brigade of the 2nd Corps, and stationed in Senjarray, an important town straddling Highway One west of Kandahar.¹¹⁵

The 2nd Corps was far from a professional army, but it did show an ability and willingness to fight against the Taliban, even when it required cross-tribal cooperation. The Alokozai 2nd Corps

commander Khan Mohammad, for example, was able to exercise operational command over the Barakzai *Nazmi Khas* by the summer of 2003, employing it for intense fighting against the Taliban in the hills of Shah Wali Kot District.¹¹⁶

The police force was also a collection of militias serving their own interests, and their excesses and abuses quickly alienated them from the people of Kandahar. The militia of the Achakzai tribe was integrated into the Afghan National Border Police and the 358th Border Brigade.¹¹⁷ Alokozai strongman Zabit Akrem Khakrezwali was named Kandahar police chief and provided a connection between the Alokozai militias and the police force.¹¹⁸ There were also Barakzai-affiliated units in the police under Nazar Jan, the Deputy Chief of police.¹¹⁹ Nazar Jan's units, according to a provincial government official, were responsible for

as many as half the crimes in Kandahar, and Jan quarreled frequently with Khakrezwali.¹²⁰

Most of these tribal militias used their power primarily to further the narrow interests of their commanders.

From 2003 to 2005, the UN's Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program sought to demobilize Afghanistan's militias (or, in UN parlance, the Afghan Military

Forces, or AMF). The DDR program would set the stage for the AMF's replacement with the new Afghan National Army (ANA). In Kandahar this meant disbanding the 2nd Corps, a process mostly completed by February 2005.¹²¹ Demobilization took the militias off the Ministry of Defense payroll,¹²² but they did not cease to exist. The program was uneven in its effects, targeting certain Kandahari strongmen more than others. Those strongmen who were rigorously targeted for disarmament included the Popolzai Amir Lalai and the Alizai Habibullah Jan, both of whom seemed content to go into politics, and were elected to the Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of the Afghan parliament, in 2005.¹²³ Lalai reportedly owed his seat to a deal with Ahmed Wali Karzai, who lined up Popolzai votes to compensate him for the loss of his militia.¹²⁴ The real loser in the disarma-

ment process was the Alokozai tribe. Zabit Akrem Khakrezwali was removed as chief of police in August 2003 and Khan Mohammed lost command of the 2nd Corps when it was disbanded.¹²⁵ Elements of the Barakzai *Nazmi Khas* were reassigned to the Kandahar Police Department, presumably to replace the Alokozai.¹²⁶ The Alokozai militia didn't disappear, but by 2005 it had lost its investment in the Kandahar and Kabul governments. In stark contrast to the disarmament and slow distancing of tribal militias from the government, the Achakzai militias remained robust and integrated into the Afghan state through the Afghan National Border Police, where they fought under the command of the charismatic Achakzai leader General Abdul Razik.¹²⁷

The DDR process failed to align with the development of a robust national army to exert central state authority. In September 2004, as the units of the 2nd Corps were disbanded, the ANA stood up the 205th "Hero" Corps.¹²⁸ The unit was initially commanded by General Muslim Hamid and based at Camp Sherzai near the Kandahar Airfield.¹²⁹ During the summer of 2005, it conducted combat operations with U.S. troops in Uruzgan, Zabul, and the northern districts of Kandahar.¹³⁰ However, no more than two battalions of the 2nd Corps were operational in Kandahar as of 2005.

Militia Integration into Private Security Companies

The decoupling of the tribal militias from the Afghan National Security Forces meant that many security commanders and large numbers of tribal recruits lost their stake in the government by 2005. Several of the militia commanders, however, managed to avoid the disarmament process and maintain their forces and weapons by integrating their forces into private security companies. Most of those security commanders were attached either to the mostly Barakzai network of Gul Agha Sherzai or the network of the Karzais' militias that became privatized after 2005. Contracts continued to be awarded to security commanders with close ties either to Karzai or to Sherzai, maintaining these leaders' positions as sources of patronage.¹³¹

The Sherzai network benefited considerably from the contacts it had built with the international community from 2001 to 2005, and after it was sidelined from the Kandahar government, much of its energy went into securing lucrative contracts. Gul Agha Sherzai's brother Razziq Sherzai continued to play a major role in securing contracts from Kandahar Airfield, in addition to leading the family's mining and construction interests.¹³² One of Gul Agha Sherzai's key lieutenants, Colonel Tor Jan, received a contract in 2005 to provide security for the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kandahar.¹³³ Another of Sherzai's allies, General Gul Alai, also received numerous contracts from Canadian forces starting in 2006.¹³⁴ Gul Alai had been briefly assigned control of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), Afghanistan's domestic intelligence directorate, in Kandahar in 2002; however, he was soon removed by Karzai as a means of expanding central control over the Kandahar NDS. Gul Alai refused to step down, however, requiring U.S. forces to intervene and expel him from the post in 2003.¹³⁵ Additional militia units were hired by the UN until the organization withdrew from Kandahar. In 2004 and 2005, the *Nazmi Khas*, Governor Sherzai's elite unit, was often used to provide road security for UN missions.¹³⁶

But the Sherzai network lost its exclusive hold on contracts when Ahmed Wali Karzai replaced Sherzai as the key powerbroker in the Kandahar government in 2005, and Popolzai militias affiliated with Wali Karzai began to win contracts as well.¹³⁷ The money provided by the widespread use of local militias for protective services has given many armed Kandaharis a greater incentive to protect the sources of their funding, and in some cases, to compete violently with one another for contracts, rather than to protect the population or defeat the Taliban.¹³⁸

The declining independence and influence of the major Durrani tribal strongmen due to disarmament was compounded by Ahmed Wali Karzai's political maneuvering. The Karzai family aimed to guarantee the loyalty of the Durrani strongmen by bringing them under its control. To build his own power base, Ahmed Wali Karzai created a sys-

tem of district councils to co-opt tribal notables, and he headed his own provincial reform council in Kandahar even before the government stood up the official provincial development councils. This provincial council attempted to capitalize on the discontent which weaker tribal leaders felt toward Gul Agha Sherzai. Wali Karzai posed as the champion of tribes excluded from Sherzai's administration, including the Noorzai, Alizai, and Ishaqzai, by calling on Sherzai to address the Barakzai monopoly on provincial offices.¹³⁹

In many instances, Wali Karzai worked to expand his influence by elevating to office figures with weak power bases that would rely on his support to maintain their power. The most notable example of this tactic was Wali Karzai's attempt to increase his allies influence over the Noorzai tribe. Elements of the Noorzai tribal leadership had shown strong support for the Taliban during the 1990s and many remained sympathetic to the Taliban after 2001.¹⁴⁰ The tribe was led during this period by Bashir Noorzai, who had been a key opium exporter and financier for the Taliban in the 1990s.¹⁴¹ Bashir Noorzai ceded political control of Maiwand to Sherzai in January 2002, but Noorzai was excluded from influence in the new Kandahar government. Due to Sherzai and Wali Karzai's influence, Bashir Noorzai fell out with U.S. forces in Kandahar and fled Kandahar for Quetta, where he resumed control of his narcotics business and his connections with the Taliban.¹⁴² Bashir Noorzai's main rival for influence within the Noorzai tribe and for control over the Noorzai drug business was Arif Noorzai, an important ally of Wali Karzai's.¹⁴³ Arif Noorzai had married into the Karzai family, and Noorzai's sister was the wife of Wali Karzai.¹⁴⁴ Wali Karzai helped Arif Noorzai take control of the Noorzai smuggling business.¹⁴⁵ Ahmed Wali Karzai and Governor Sherzai, who also opposed the pro-Taliban Bashir Noorzai, provided evidence of his use of the opium trade to bankroll the Taliban, which led the U.S. to designate Bashir Noorzai as a foreign narcotics kingpin and arrest him in 2005.¹⁴⁶ Several Afghan sources, including Karzai rival Habibullah Jan, accused Wali Karzai of targeting Bashir Noorzai for the sake of taking over his drug business.¹⁴⁷ The political motives of individuals who have ac-

cused Wali Karzai of connections to the drug trade must be taken into consideration,¹⁴⁸ and in the case of Bashir Noorzai the more nuanced reality is that Wali Karzai targeted Noorzai in order to install a key ally, who would be dependent on and indebted to Wali Karzai's influence, in a position of influence.¹⁴⁹ But Wali Karzai's maneuvering ultimately did not give him influence over the Noorzai tribe, as Arif Noorzai, had little authority over the Noorzai, and without strong pro-government tribal leaders, much of the Noorzai would support the Taliban when they returned to Noorzai areas in 2006.¹⁵⁰

In 2005, two events significantly changed the dynamics of Kandahari politics – the removal of Governor Sherzai and the election of the Kandahari Provincial Council. The Barakzai monopoly on the civil administration was reversed in the summer of 2005, when President Hamid Karzai reassigned Sherzai for a second time, moving him to serve as governor of Nangarhar province.¹⁵¹ He was replaced by Asadullah Khalid, the young and charismatic former governor of Ghazni province.¹⁵² As the governor of Ghazni from 2001 to 2005, Khalid had earned the trust of the U.S. military and a reputation for his tough stance against the Taliban.¹⁵³ More importantly, Khalid was known as a close ally of the Kabul government and the Karzai family, and would serve their interests in Kandahar.¹⁵⁴

In September 2005, Afghans elected representatives to the Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of the Afghan Parliament, and to the provincial councils.¹⁵⁵ The Wolesi Jirga election demonstrated the relative strength of various Kandahari tribal leaders to mobilize their tribes for electoral politics. The Popolzai elite, now led by the Karzai family, demonstrated the greatest ability to mobilize their tribe's support for handpicked candidates. Popolzai leaders Qayum Karzai, President Karzai's older brother, and former strongman Amir Lalai were elected to the Wolesi Jirga.¹⁵⁶ Amir Lalai had been a rival to the Karzais for leadership of the Popolzai tribe, but in 2005 Wali Karzai made a deal with Amir Lalai, helping him win a seat in the Wolesi Jirga in exchange for Lalai's cooperation.¹⁵⁷ Sherzai, however, was

less successful in influencing his own Barakzai tribe. Sherzai's absence in Nangarhar precipitated an intra-tribal rebellion against his rough-and-tumble style of rule and his attempts to dominate the tribe.¹⁵⁸ Former Parcham leader and Soviet ally General Noor-ul-haq Ulomi emerged as a powerful rival.¹⁵⁹ Ulomi, a leading figure in the opposition,¹⁶⁰ successfully ran against pro-Sherzai candidates for the Barakzai vote in the 2005 Wolesi Jirga election, winning through an alliance of Barakzai elders and Kandahar's small intelligentsia.¹⁶¹ Though Sherzai's network had lost much of its hold over the Barakzai tribe, it did retain considerable power due to its continued connection to ISAF and the number of contracts it held. One of Sherzai's key lieutenants, Khalid Pashtun, was elected to the Wolesi Jirga.¹⁶² Gul Agha Sherzai's brother's Raziq and Padshah Sherzai maintained their influence on contracts at Kandahar Airfield, and the militia of Sherzai lieutenant Tor Jan became the protection force for the Kandahar PRT.¹⁶³

Habibullah Jan (an Alizai strongman who often quarreled with Wali Karzai), Arif Noorzai (a Noorzai leader loyal to the Karzais), and an Achakzai tribal elder were elected to the Wolesi Jirga.¹⁶⁴ Four other individuals were also elected from Kandahar, three of whom filled the mandatory quota for women Members of Parliament (MPs).¹⁶⁵ The Alokozai tribe was unable to win representation in the Wolesi Jirga and elected only one representative to the Kandahar Provincial Council.¹⁶⁶ The failure indicated the inability of the Alokozai tribal leadership to adjust to new forms of politics, which demanded electoral organization and mass patronage.

Fifteen members, including a mandated four women, were elected to the Kandahar Provincial Council.¹⁶⁷ Ahmed Wali Karzai garnered the largest number of votes in the election,¹⁶⁸ and though his supporters did not win a majority on the Council, Wali Karzai became Council President.¹⁶⁹ With a friendly governor under his influence, Karzai was at last able to make use of his careful preparations for power. Though Wali Karzai had advocated against the Barakzai monopoly on provincial offices before coming to power,

after 2005, he flooded Kandahar's civil administration with the appointment of his Popolzai allies. By October 2006, eight of seventeen district chiefs in Kandahar were Popolzai.¹⁷⁰

The tribal alliance of 2001 had collapsed by the beginning of 2006. Sidelined by both the DDR process and Ahmed Wali Karzai in his quest for power, a large portion of Kandahar's tribal leadership had tenuous loyalty to and little stake in the Karzai government. Key commanders and militia units became privatized and focused their attention on winning contracts, rather than being integrated into the Afghan National Police (ANP) or ANA. The Kandahar provincial government and Ahmed Wali Karzai would not be able to stage a vigorous resistance when the Taliban returned to Kandahar.

THE TALIBAN IN KANDAHAR

The Taliban has shown a keen ability to exploit Kandahar's political and tribal dynamics, offering protection and services, including a reputable justice system, to groups that have felt marginalized by their local government. Since 2004, Taliban operations in the south have followed an evolving strategic framework focused on isolating, infiltrating, and eventually capturing Kandahar City. The Taliban movement, which calls itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, views itself in many ways as a government in exile and has sought to reestablish its control over Kandahar.¹⁷¹

By the end of 2002, much of the Taliban's senior leadership had reconstituted itself in the Pakistani city of Quetta and set up training camps in Pakistan.¹⁷² This body evolved into the structure known as the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST). The QST directs Taliban strategy for the entire southern region of Afghanistan from Quetta.¹⁷³ Here, Taliban commanders formulate strategy through face to face meetings and conferences.¹⁷⁴ Mullah Mohammad Omar, who since 1996 has been regarded by the Taliban as the *Amir-ul-Momineen*, or leader of the faithful, presides over the Taliban's strategic deliberations, though his role in operational planning is limited.¹⁷⁵ Mullah Omar owes his position mostly to his piety and spiritual



MAP 2 | NORTHERN KANDAHAR PROVINCE

leadership, not to his charisma or military experience.¹⁷⁶ Strategy is formulated by two Taliban councils, the *rahbari shura* (leadership council) and the *majlis al-shura* (consultative council).¹⁷⁷ The *rahbari shura* started with ten members in 2003, but by 2008, it had expanded to include thirty-five members in an attempt to balance the interests of its growing constituency.¹⁷⁸ The *majlis al-shura* was founded by Mullah Omar and consists mostly of military commanders already sitting on the *rahbari shura*.¹⁷⁹ Taliban field commanders are brought into the operational planning process through a rotation system, which allows them to spend a portion of their year in Quetta.¹⁸⁰ During their time in Quetta, commanders are updated on the Taliban's strategy and tactics and discuss developments in lessons-learned sessions.¹⁸¹ A lull in combat operations from October to April, which was an annual occurrence until 2008, gave the Taliban an opportunity to formulate a campaign plan for the coming year, which could then be adjusted during the summer months.¹⁸²

By 2006, the Taliban's military structure was dominated by Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Osmani, Mullah Omar's personal confidant and second-in-command, and Mullah Dadullah Akhund, a Taliban commander with a reputation for savagery who returned to the southern theater after leading suicide bombings in the Kabul area in 2003.¹⁸³ Other key Taliban commanders on the *rahbari shura* from 2004 to 2006 included Mullah Hafiz Majid, a Noorzai tribal leader who functioned as the Taliban's diplomat and recruiting head among the southern tribes, and Mullah Obaidullah, the former Taliban Defense Minister.¹⁸⁴ Of these four commanders, all but Hafiz Majid were captured or killed by 2007.¹⁸⁵

Taliban operations in Kandahar have followed a traceable operational concept focused on gaining control of Kandahar City since 2004. Prior to 2004, small groups of Taliban fighters conducted minor attacks in Kandahar City, including the assassinations of pro-government mullahs, ineffective rocket and mortar attacks, and the distribution of night letters, called *shabnameh* in Dari

and Pashtu, warning citizens against cooperation with the government.¹⁸⁶ These attacks succeeded in driving most international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) out of the province by the end of 2003.¹⁸⁷

By 2004, the Taliban had developed lines of communication (LOCs) into Afghanistan from Pakistan and consolidated control over the mountainous region spanning the borders of Kandahar, Zabul, and Uruzgan.¹⁸⁸ Violence increased steadily in Zabul and Uruzgan Provinces in 2004 as the Taliban moved larger numbers of fighters through these provinces from Pakistan.¹⁸⁹ The Taliban's chief entry points during this period were in the Maruf district of Kandahar and the Shamulzayi district of Zabul.¹⁹⁰ The Maruf district is inhabited mostly by Barakzais who, due to their tribal affiliation, were not receptive to the Taliban, but the Taliban confined their activities to unpopulated mountainous regions of the district.¹⁹¹ There was little sustained U.S. or ANSF presence in Maruf until French Special Forces set up a combat outpost in the district center in 2005.¹⁹² The Taliban's earliest bases for Kandahar were in the Arghandab river valley on the border of Kandahar and Zabul provinces and in several of the narrow valleys that cut south and joined the Arghandab in the eastern reaches of Shah Wali Kot district.¹⁹³ The most important of these was the Chenartu valley, in which the Taliban had strongholds at the towns of Zamto Kalay, El Bak, and Ordobagh.¹⁹⁴ This mountainous segment of the Arghandab river system was inhabited by Hotak Ghilzai tribesmen who had family connections to the Taliban and were hostile to the Durrani networks which dominated the Kandahar government.¹⁹⁵

In 2004, the Taliban attempted to advance against Kandahar City from their bases in Uruzgan, Zabul, and Shah Wali Kot.¹⁹⁶ They were checked by a battalion of U.S. infantry deployed to Kandahar as part of Task Force Bronco. Task Force Bronco operated in Arghandab and Shah Wali Kot districts along the north-south Kandahar to Tarin Kot Highway.¹⁹⁷ Renovation of this highway was a major objective for the U.S. forces in 2004, and the road allowed the more rapid movement of

U.S. troops to respond to Taliban threats from the north.¹⁹⁸

After the Taliban's 2004 campaign to advance on Kandahar City from the north was checked by Task Force Bronco, the Taliban turned their attention to extending their lines of communication from their bases in the Uruzgan, Zabul, and Shah Wali Kot westward, to secure major east-west route into northern Helmand.¹⁹⁹ A number of roads run east-west across northern Kandahar province, from Taliban stronghold in Shah Wali Kot in northern Khakrez, Ghorak, Nesh, and northern Helmand province. The towns of Chenar and Tambil in Khakrez and Lam in Ghorak, which are located along the primary east-west lines of communication which form a major route from Kandahar into Helmand, became key targets for Taliban operations in 2005, suggesting that the Taliban were intent on consolidating a nexus between the two provinces.²⁰⁰ The far western anchor of this important Taliban line of communications was the Baghran and Sangin districts of Helmand, where the Taliban had the support of local powerbrokers and established basing areas in 2005.²⁰¹ From areas like Sangin in Helmand Province, the Taliban would open up a second front against Kandahar City by moving troops eastward into Panjwai and Zhari in 2006.²⁰²

Operations conducted by U.S. Task Force Bayonet, which replaced Task Force Bronco in 2005, remained focused on securing the northern approaches to Kandahar, but did not respond to the Taliban's campaign to consolidate lines of communication from Kandahar to Helmand.²⁰³ In 2005, U.S. forces targeted the Taliban positions in the Chenartu Valley during Operation Diablo, and in Mianeshin and the Kandahar-Zabul border area in Operation Cantania, but there was no sustained coalition presence to drive the Taliban out of these positions.²⁰⁴ In 2006, the U.S. Army built Forward Operating Base (FOB) Mizan, FOB Baylough, and FOB Lane in the northwest areas of Zabul province to deny the Taliban sanctuary in the far eastern areas of the province, but by 2006 the Taliban had advanced to positions deeper in Kandahar and Uruzgan.²⁰⁵ Two coalition outposts, the Gunbad Platoon House and

FOB Martello, were constructed in 2005 and 2006, respectively, along north-south roads in Kandahar.²⁰⁶ But the positioning of these bases could only block Taliban movement south from Shah Wali Kot, not movement into Helmand. When the Taliban surged in Zhari and Panjwai in 2006, ISAF reduced its presence in northern Kandahar further.²⁰⁷ The Gunbad Platoon House was dismantled in the summer of 2006, and by 2006 the only sustained coalition presence in northern Kandahar was FOB Martello, defending the Kandahar-Tarin Kot highway.²⁰⁸ Since 2004, the coalition has been unable to deny the Taliban use of northern Kandahar as a basing area and key LOC for the entire southern theater. In 2009, ISAF commanders continued to describe the Taliban's LOC from northern Kandahar into Helmand through Ghorak as a "jet stream" for Taliban fighters moving between Kandahar and Helmand.²⁰⁹

As they consolidated their lines of communication across southern Afghanistan, the Taliban embarked on a new and more sophisticated bombing campaign in Kandahar City in the fall of 2005. The campaign was led by Mullah Dadullah Akhund, who served as the Taliban's overall field commander and had connections to suicide bombing units in the Kabul area.²¹⁰ Dadullah's suicide bombing campaign in 2005 polarized the Taliban's senior leadership, which was concerned by Dadullah's reputation for inflicting violence.²¹¹ As a Taliban commander in the 1990s, he was removed from command on multiple occasions for terrorizing local populations and perpetrating mass killings of non-Pashtuns.²¹² Mullah Omar and Mullah Osmani, had reservations about Dadullah's use of suicide bombers.²¹³ In the end, Mullah Omar compromised; Pakistani suicide bombers could be employed for suicide bombings, but locals would not be.²¹⁴

THE TALIBAN'S 2006 OFFENSIVE

Having been prevented from moving against Kandahar City from the north in 2004 and 2005, the next major development in Taliban campaign was an offensive into the Zhari and Panjwai districts.

With the coalition focusing its attention on northern Kandahar in 2005, Zhari and Panjwai offered an undefended approach to Kandahar City. For the Taliban's leadership, Zhari and Panjwai were an ideal staging ground for a campaign against the Afghan government in Kandahar City. Many of the Taliban's senior leadership, including Mullah Omar, Mullah Osmani, and Mullah Obaidullah, were born, raised, fought, or preached in the area.²¹⁵ During the anti-Soviet jihad, Panjwai was the center of gravity for the campaign in the south.²¹⁶ As early as 1982, mujahideen fighters had asserted their control over Panjwai, won the enthusiastic support of the local population, and used the area to launch attacks against Soviet-held Kandahar City.²¹⁷ The Soviet Army attempted to retake parts of Panjwai in the fall of 1982, but the mujahideen took advantage of the terrain, with its dense orchards, vineyards, walled compounds, narrow lanes, and canals, to slow the Soviet advance.²¹⁸ The mujahideen inflicted heavy casualties on the Soviets, and confined them to the Panjwai district center.²¹⁹ In the following years, Panjwai provided a base for ambushes on Soviet convoys moving along Highway One and supported mujahideen positions in the suburbs of Kandahar City and mujahideen raids into Kandahar City itself.²²⁰ Many of the Taliban's senior commanders had fought with the mujahadeen, and the potential of repeating the successes of the 1980s was certainly not lost on them.

Panjwai was also the staging ground for the Taliban movement in 1994, and it was in Panjwai that Mullah Omar began his rise to power.²²¹ The Taliban's origins in Panjwai provided the insurgents with numerous family contacts and earned them some sympathy from Noorzai, Ishaqzai, and Hotak tribes in the area. These tribes were excluded from the Zirak Durrani alliance which controlled Kandahar, but they were well represented among the Taliban's senior leadership.²²² The Taliban's leadership showed sensitivity to the sentiments of the Noorzai, Ishaqzai, and Hotak tribes, and dispatched senior *rahbari shura* member and Noorzai tribal leader Hafiz Masjid to reach out to tribal leaders in Kandahar and win their support.²²³ The Taliban's leadership likely expected that considerable local sympathy would

facilitate their move into Zhari and Panjwai.

The Taliban had a small presence in Panjwai before their major expansion in 2006. In 2005, a Taliban cell under the command of Mullah Baqi operated in Panjwai, where it attacked vehicle traffic on Highway One, intimidated locals, and carried out select assassinations.²²⁴ Other elements of Mullah Dadullah's network, meanwhile, focused on targeting foreign troops with a suicide bombing campaign around Kandahar City in the fall of 2005.²²⁵

As the Taliban prepared to move into Panjwai, responsibility for Kandahar province transitioned from the U.S. forces operating as part of Operation Enduring Freedom to the NATO-led International Security and Assistance Force.²²⁶ The handover was the third stage in the expansion of NATO's responsibilities in Afghanistan, and Regional Command South (RC South) was to be transitioned to ISAF on July 1, 2006.²²⁷ The Taliban were almost certainly aware of the pending transition, and may have viewed it as a strategic opportunity. The notion that America's military presence in Afghanistan would not be sustained was circulating in Taliban ranks in 2005,²²⁸ and the Taliban may have seen the handover of Kandahar to the Canadians as confirmation of this.²²⁹ U.S. and NATO operations in Kandahar from 2002 to 2006 were limited to a series of raids and clearing operations in the mountainous northern part of the province, along the north-south axis from Kandahar to Tarin Kot. There were no more than three battalions of international forces operating in the entirety of Regional Command South before 2006, and almost no international military presence in Kandahar City, and none in Panjwai and Zhari.²³⁰ Given the focus of international forces on northern Kandahar prior to 2006, the Taliban may have anticipated minimal resistance against a move into Zhari and Panjwai.

The Canadians Deploy to Kandahar

In preparation for the security handover, some 2,000 troops from the Canadian Task Force Orion deployed to Kandahar Province in February 2006.²³¹ The new Canadian force consisted of a combat battalion with three mechanized companies and a PRT.²³² The Canadian plan at the beginning of the deployment was to position its three companies in FOBs throughout the province.²³³ One company would be stationed on the northern edge of the province in FOB Martello.²³⁴ A second company would be based at Patrol Base Wilson in Zhari District, and a third would deploy to a FOB in Spin Boldak on the Pakistani border.²³⁵

At the beginning of their deployment, the Canadians found themselves the target of intermittent vehicle-borne suicide bombings. On January 15, 2006, before Canadian units had landed, the director of the Canadian PRT, senior diplomat Glynn Berry, was killed by a suicide attack in Kandahar City.²³⁶ Attacks continued sporadically that spring.²³⁷

During the spring of 2006, the Taliban moved into the Panjwai peninsula south of the Arghandab River, where they hoped to base themselves with sympathetic tribal groups like the Noorzai and small pockets of Ghilzai, many of which probably had friends and family members in the Taliban ranks.²³⁸ But local tribes in Panjwai asked the Taliban to move elsewhere, reluctant to see a major battle fought amidst their farms and homes.²³⁹ The Taliban acquiesced, and in April, they moved across the Arghandab River into Zhari. In Zhari the Taliban launched attacks on the local ANP force, fighting several engagements in April 2006.²⁴⁰

The Canadians responded to the Taliban build-up during the summer of 2006 with four separate

There were no more than three battalions of international forces operating in the entirety of Regional Command South before 2006, and almost no international military presence in Kandahar City.

attacks on Taliban strongholds around the towns of Bayanzi and Payendi in the Pashmul area of Zhari.²⁴¹ The attacks involved approximately two Canadian infantry companies and a small ANA battalion.²⁴² In all four cases, the Canadians took their objectives, overcoming determined Taliban resistance with the help of artillery and air support.²⁴³ But in each instance the Canadians then pulled back from Zhari and Panjwai, and the Taliban quickly reoccupied Pashmul in force.²⁴⁴ The Canadian battalion was too small to conduct sustained combat operations, and only one company was assigned to cover Zhari and Panjwai.²⁴⁵ The Canadian battalion was also spread thin by its orders to assist with Operation Mountain Thrust, a combined operation with U.S. forces and the newly-arrived British, Dutch, and Danish contingents that were to take responsibility for Helmand Province.²⁴⁶ The operation focused on dislodging the Taliban from their safe haven in the mountainous belt connecting Zabul, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Helmand Provinces.²⁴⁷

The first of the Canadian assaults on Pashmul, fought in May 2006, was seen as a major event by the population of Kandahar, suggesting that Kandaharis were deeply worried about a Taliban incursion into Kandahar City, and that the Canadian victory had a positive psychological effect. As the Canadian troops returned to their bases, residents of Kandahar City crowded the streets to cheer the Canadians and celebrate the victory.²⁴⁸

As successive small Canadian operations during the summer of 2006 failed to clear the Taliban from Zhari and Panjwai, the Kandahar provincial government, led by the newly-appointed governor, Asadullah Khalid, attempted its own response to the Taliban's occupation of Zhari and Panjwai. In August 2006, the Achakzai militia of Abdul Razik, commander of the mostly Achakzai Afghan National Border Police in Kandahar, was sent to clear the Taliban out of Panjwai.²⁴⁹ The move was a disaster. The presence of a large Achakzai force reignited the feud between the Achakzai and their traditional rivals, the Noorzai, who turned to the Taliban, rose up in resistance and decisively defeated the Achakzai force.²⁵⁰ The Achakzai incursion into Panjwai swelled the

ranks of Taliban fighters in the area, as Noorzai tribesmen took up arms: a Kandahar Provincial Council member stated that "one village had 10 or 20 fighters against the government before [Abdul Razik] came, and the next day, maybe 200."²⁵¹

More successful than ISAF and ANSF operations in Panjwai and Zhari over the summer of 2006 was a campaign undertaken by Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) to eradicate Taliban cells operating in Kandahar City. The NDS raided mosques infiltrated by the Taliban and detained a large number of suspects.²⁵²

Operation Medusa

There were signs by August 2006 that the Taliban fighters in Zhari and Panjwai were preparing for an assault on Kandahar City. On August 19, 2006, several hundred Taliban fighters launched an assault on Bazaar-e Panjwai, the Panjwai district center, which was defended by a Canadian company.²⁵³ The Canadians beat back the Taliban offensive and successfully prevented Taliban penetration into Bazaar-e Panjwai.²⁵⁴ To counter further Taliban attacks, the Canadians planned a major clearing operation in Zhari district.²⁵⁵

ISAF launched Operation Medusa on September 2, 2006.²⁵⁶ After preparatory artillery and aerial bombardments, two Canadian companies attacked Pashmul from the south, crossing the Arghandab River and clashing with entrenched Taliban defenders.²⁵⁷ Taliban fighters repelled this initial assault with counterattacks from layered defensive positions.²⁵⁸

In a possible attempt to divert ISAF's attention away from Pashmul, the Taliban launched an assault on FOB Martello in Shah Wali Kot on September 4 and 5, 2006. A force of about eighty Taliban fighters attacked the FOB in a coordinated assault lasting six hours, but the Canadian and Dutch force holding the post repelled the Taliban attack without casualties.²⁵⁹ The attack on FOB Martello failed to divert Canadian attention from Operation Medusa, but diversionary attacks would continue to be used by the Taliban in subsequent campaigns.

On September 6, 2006, the Canadians shifted the direction of their attack to the north, where an infantry company began a systematic move south from Highway One.²⁶⁰ Using armored bulldozers, ISAF troops slowly pushed through Taliban defenses by destroying bunkers, fire trenches, and other fortifications.²⁶¹ ISAF artillery and close air support disrupted enemy counterattacks and lines of communication, preventing the enemy from resupplying their positions and disrupting its command and control.²⁶²

ISAF's northern assault force penetrated the enemy's defenses and linked up with the initial invading force to the south.²⁶³ NATO forces then pushed west,²⁶⁴ as an Afghan National Army battalion pushed east toward Kandahar City, clearing the area of enemy fighters by September 17, 2006.²⁶⁵ Estimates of enemy casualties vary. NATO initially claimed that 512 Taliban fighters were killed and one hundred captured, but they later estimated that more than 1,000 Taliban fighters were killed.²⁶⁶ In all, the defense of Pashmul was an unqualified disaster for the Taliban.

THE FAILURE OF CANADIAN COUNTERINSURGENCY IN ZHARI AND PANJWAI

In 2007 and early 2008, the Canadian battle group focused on fighting the Taliban for control of Zhari and Panjwai. The Canadian attempts to do so ultimately developed into a costly stalemate, leading the Canadians to gradually withdraw from the area. The Canadian experience in Zhari and Panjwai demonstrated that a battalion-sized force was insufficient to decisively clear or destroy enemy networks in these districts. It also revealed the dangers of deploying insufficiently trained and unprofessional ANP units.

Only a month after Operation Medusa, Taliban ambushes against Canadian troops in Pashmul made it clear that the operation had failed to assert government control over Zhari and Panjwai.²⁶⁷ In mid-December 2006, the Canadians followed up Operation Medusa with Operation Baaz Tzuka, designed to clear lingering Taliban

cells from the villages of Talokan and Mushan on the Panjwai Peninsula, and from Howz-e Medad on Highway One.²⁶⁸ The operation met little resistance. Taliban fighters, who the Canadians expected to defend their ground, simply moved out of the immediate vicinity of the Canadian operations and blended in with the population in neighboring villages.²⁶⁹ The Taliban's refusal to hold position during Operation Baaz Tzuka signaled a major shift in the insurgent's tactics following their disastrous losses in Operation Medusa. After Medusa, the Taliban operated with small groups of fighters rather than large formations, and insurgents took up residence living with locals in family compounds and mosques.²⁷⁰ Small weapons caches were scattered throughout the countryside, allowing the Taliban to move about unarmed, and in some cases, to move past Coalition positions unobstructed. Taliban fighters could arm themselves from these caches, launch attacks on Coalition forces, hide their weapons, and then melt into the population.²⁷¹

To secure Zhari and Panjwai against Taliban insurgents, the Canadians established a chain of bases in the two districts with the intention of handing over these bases to the Afghan Security Forces.²⁷² The Canadian presence was anchored by two Canadian positions: Patrol Base Wilson on Highway One, three kilometers north of Pashmul, and FOB Mesum Ghar, two kilometers south of Pashmul overlooking the Panjwai district center and the Arghandab River.²⁷³ A third Canadian outpost was established at Sperwan Ghar, six kilometers southwest of Mesum Ghar on a prominent ridge with a commanding view of the river valley.²⁷⁴ Canadian forces connected Patrol Base Wilson and Mesum Ghar at the end of 2006 with a new paved road, Route Summit, running through the Taliban stronghold in Pashmul.²⁷⁵ The Taliban launched numerous attacks against this road building project during the fall of 2006.²⁷⁶

In addition to these Canadian-occupied bases, three ANP bases were established in the Taliban stronghold of western Panjwai district to supplement the already existing ISAF bases at Mesum Ghar and Sperwan Ghar. Bases were set up

seven kilometers west of FOB Sperwan Ghar in Zangabad, five kilometers west of Zangabad in the village of Talukan, and a further four kilometers west in Mushan.²⁷⁷ Operation Baaz Tzuka in December had cleared these three villages, all identified as sympathetic to the Taliban, in preparation for the construction of ANP posts,²⁷⁸ but the Taliban would soon reinfiltrate these areas. In Zhari, a major ANP base already existed on the western edge of Zhari district, on a key hill called Ghundy Ghar overlooking the village of Lakokhel.²⁷⁹ A final ANP post was established later in 2007 in Howz-e Medad on Highway One, north of Zhari.²⁸⁰ These bases did not, however, deter the Taliban from rebuilding its force in Zhari and Panjwai. By the spring of 2007, the Taliban's force in Zhari and Panjwai was estimated to consist of some 600 insurgents, growing to the strength of approximately 1,200 insurgents at the end of 2008.²⁸¹

Canadian patrols responded to building Taliban presence in the spring of 2007 by patrolling inward from the bases on the outskirts of Zhari,

targeting a triangular area running from Pashmul west to Sangsar and Nalgham, known as a Taliban stronghold. These Canadian patrols encountered some resistance from the Taliban, but retained overall freedom of movement.²⁸² The Canadians were considering moving into the Sangsar-Nalgham area in force to establish ANP checkpoints in April 2007, but there were insufficient Canadian and ANA resources to do so.²⁸³ One month later the Canadians conducted operations with two to three companies through insurgent-held areas in central Zhari, but they did not conduct systematic clearing or searches.²⁸⁴ The operations were designed primarily as presence patrols and did nothing to dislocate the Taliban from the Zhari district.²⁸⁵

The Canadians were limited to performing presence patrols because their force was too small to employ important counterinsurgency tactics, like conducting clearing missions and holding terrain. At times, the Canadian presence in Panjwai and Zhari was limited to a single company as Canadian units were sent on multi-week assignments



MAP 3 | ZHARI AND PANJWAI

across Kandahar and Helmand provinces.²⁸⁶ Because the Canadians could only move sporadically through the populated areas of Zhari and did not have sufficient troop strength to be a constant presence, they were limited in their ability to generate actionable intelligence. Canadian operations in the spring of 2007 resulted in few caches and bomb-making facilities seized, and even fewer fighters captured.²⁸⁷ Even with actionable intelligence or tips from the local population, small Canadian formations without air assault capabilities moved too slowly over the difficult and canalized terrain of Zhari and Panjwai to successfully detain suspects.²⁸⁸ The Canadians were occasionally able to conduct night patrols as a means of preventing Taliban ambushes on Highway One during the spring and summer of 2007.²⁸⁹ The tactic proved effective, as Highway One was free of attacks when and where night patrols were conducted.²⁹⁰ But there were insufficient troops to conduct night patrols for more than a few weeks at a time or in large areas.²⁹¹

To counter the Canadians in Zhari and Panjwai, the Taliban began an IED campaign in 2007, using increasingly powerful and frequent IED attacks. By April 2007, the Taliban adopted the practice of rigging several bombs together, and Taliban IED attacks began to destroy Canadian light armored vehicles inflicting fatal casualties on their crews.²⁹² The Taliban's IED campaign aimed at limiting Canadian freedom of movement and forcing the Canadians to devote their attention to force protection. Key objectives of the Taliban's campaign were the lines of communication which connected Canadian positions in Zhari and Panjwai to Kandahar Airfield.²⁹³ IED attacks became an almost daily occurrence on the section of Highway One running through the Zhari district.²⁹⁴ The Taliban also conducted frequent IED attacks against Route Fosters, the road stretching southwest from Kandahar City to Bazaar-e Panjwai, and from there across the Panjwai peninsula to FOB Mushan.²⁹⁵

Taliban IED cells were able to take advantage of the Canadians' failure to establish even a limited presence in certain areas of Zhari and Panjwai. Parts of Zhari not held by the Canadians were an

ideal location for attacks on Highway One. Using bases in Zhari's dense terrain to target Highway One was a tactic first used by the mujahideen, who had forced the Soviets to build a second highway through the more easily patrolled desert several miles north.²⁹⁶ In Panjwai, the Taliban developed key bases around the villages of Nakhonay and Belanday.²⁹⁷ Nakhonay and Belanday were Ishaqzai and Noorzai enclaves, and this provided the Taliban with a sympathetic local population.²⁹⁸ These towns sat between Kandahar City and the Canadian positions in western Panjwai peninsula, and Taliban bases in this area were thus strategically placed for attacks on the central Canadian line of communication in Panjwai. Canadian intelligence reports indicated that an IED cell had moved into the village of Nakhonay in July 2007.²⁹⁹ Despite the threat that Taliban cells in the Nakhonay area posed, the Canadians never established a permanent presence in the area, conducting only periodic raids.³⁰⁰ During one raid in the fall of 2008, the Canadians uncovered not only a bomb-making factory, but also a Taliban infirmary with IVs, sterile fluids, syringes, painkillers, and stockpiles of food supplies, clear evidence of Taliban entrenchment in the area.³⁰¹

IED cells based in Nakhonay and elsewhere in Panjwai targeted Route Fosters, the main supply route from Kandahar City to FOB Mesum Ghar, and made Canadian attempts to supply forces in Panjwai increasingly costly.³⁰² In addition, IED cells in Panjwai also targeted Canadian patrols as they passed over the narrow and canalized roads running through Panjwai's densely covered terrain, limiting the Canadians freedom of movement through the district. IED attacks, for example, were used by the Taliban to prevent the Canadians from coming to the support of besieged ANP posts.³⁰³ IEDs were also used in conjunction with ambushes to defend key pieces of terrain or key targets against advancing Canadian units.³⁰⁴ The IED campaign in Zhari and Panjwai had the net effect of taking the initiative away from the Canadians, whose military resources were increasingly focused on force protection and targeting of IED cells, rather than on separating the Taliban from the local population through counterinsurgency operations.

Problems with the Afghan Police

Canadian efforts to secure Zhari and Panjwai in 2007 also faltered due to their reliance on under-trained and ill-disciplined ANP units. The reliance on the ANP was understandable, given the small size of the Canadian deployment and ISAF's stated goal of gradually turning security over to the Afghans. But the ANP deployed to Panjwai and Zhari were too weak and undertrained to confront the Taliban. Deploying the ANP without sufficient partnering and support severely attrited the ANP in Kandahar over the course of 2007.

The Canadians turned over their posts in Panjwai in the spring of 2007 to a diverse collection of police units, some local and some recruited from non-Pashtun areas, but none of which were professional or properly trained.³⁰⁵ Some of these units were drawn from tribal militias reintegrated into the police force.³⁰⁶ Wali Karzai attempted at one point to intercede with the US advisers training the Afghan National Border police on behalf of policemen expelled for inappropriate behavior.³⁰⁷

Police efficacy also suffered from the severe lack of support for the ANP. Not only were wages for the ANP far below wages from private security firms or for the ANA, but the police were also chronically undersupplied.³⁰⁸ In other cases, there were strong social pressures for the ANP not to engage the Taliban. Any police units drawn from Kandahar faced the prospect of Taliban reprisals.³⁰⁹ The Taliban also reportedly offered bribes to ANP and ANA soldiers and infiltrated police units with agents, further explaining high rates of desertion and low morale.³¹⁰ These factors all explain why ANP units in Zhari and Panjwai sometimes refused to go into combat against the Taliban, even when partnered with the Canadians.

The deployment of the ANP 005 Standby Battalion to Mushan, Zangabad, and Taloqan, the key posts defending Panjwai, highlights the inadequacies of the ANP in 2007. Underpaid, the unit quickly resorted to theft and extortion.³¹¹ This alienated local residents, many of whom supported the Taliban's campaign to drive the unit out.³¹²

The Mushan outpost was under constant siege during the summer of 2007, and ANP police were often trapped for days. When the unit withdrew to Zangabad in June, nineteen of the forty men in the unit had been wounded or killed in action, and most of the remainder had deserted.³¹³ The Zangabad garrison, meanwhile, had been reduced from fifty men to twenty.³¹⁴ In addition to fighting the Taliban, the 005 Standby Battalion was also drawn into open conflict with the National Directorate for Security (NDS). NDS Kandahar Chief Abdul Ghafar had long been at odds with Mohammed Azim, the ANP Commander in Panjwai, and he arrested Azim during the summer of 2007.³¹⁵ The ANP's remaining posts in Panjwai came under sustained Taliban attack on August 7, 2007, and the ANP bitterly criticized ISAF and the ANA for taking hours to come to their relief.³¹⁶

North of the Arghandab River, the ANP force in Zhari had been whittled away to sixty-four men by the summer's end, a force far too small to constrain the estimated 600 Taliban fighters in the area.³¹⁷ The crucial ANP post on the Ghundy Ghar hill had been overrun by the Taliban over the course of the summer.³¹⁸ Determined attacks against the ANP across the province were a successful Taliban tactic and succeeded in seriously attriting the Afghan Police. Across Kandahar province, the ANP lost close to 1,000 police officers during 2007.³¹⁹

The Canadian battlegroup was forced to conduct several operations during the fall of 2007 to retake police posts in Zhari and Panjwai that had been lost by the ANP.³²⁰ Additional Canadian operations upgraded the defenses of these positions to allow them to house both ANP and Canadian troops.³²¹ Responding to the disasters of that summer, ISAF launched additional measures to reform the Kandahar police force. In the fall of 2007, the Canadian created Police Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (POMLTs), which attached Canadian officers or non-commissioned officers to ANP units deployed in Zhari and Panjwai.³²² The POMLTs gave the Canadians greater oversight over the ANP, and the Canadian mentors worked to prevent the establishment of

illegal police checkpoints.³²³ In October 2007, the Canadians began to pay ANP salaries directly through the POMLTs, to bypass corrupt commanders who kept a large fraction of their officers' paychecks.³²⁴ Several non-Pashtun police units also deployed to Kandahar in the fall. In Pashmul, the Canadians experimented with a mixed Tajik and Pashtun force, but the unit refused to engage the Taliban.³²⁵ The Canadians had more luck when they deployed a Hazara police force to Pashmul late in 2007. The unit was willing to engage the Taliban, whom the Hazaras bitterly resented, but as outsiders, the Hazaras lacked local knowledge and spoke Dari, not Pashtu.³²⁶

By 2008, it was evident that the small size of the Canadian battle group and the lack of professionalism and training of the ANP rendered these forces insufficient to secure Zhari and Panjwai. The Canadians made a final attempt to extend the territory under their control in Zhari in November 2007, when they conducted Operation Tashwish Mekawa to recapture Sangsar and construct an outpost to be manned by the ANP and their mentors.³²⁷ Sangsar was identified as the base for a number of Taliban attacks against ANP posts in Zhari.³²⁸ But after the move into Sangsar the Canadians were forced to gradually contract their presence in Zhari. Taliban IED attacks and ambushes soon made the ANP post in Sangsar unsustainable. Resupplying the outpost required "a battalion-level operation once per month," and the post was closed six months later in May 2008.³²⁹ Posts in Panjwai were similarly under constant attack.³³⁰

In the spring of 2008, the Canadians focused much of their energy in Panjwai on the construction of a paved road from FOB Mesum Ghar to Mushan.³³¹ The road would pass through the Taliban's stronghold on the Panjwai peninsula.³³² Yet, consistent Taliban IED attacks and ambushes against the project, as well as an intimidation campaign against local hired to work on the road slowed progress.³³³

In addition to the road paving project, the Canadians added another COP near the towns of Haji Soltanmohammad Khan and Haji Atamohammad

Khan, half way between the Canadian bases at Massum Ghar and Talukan, to provide increased security for fourteen kilometers of Route Fosters from Bazaar-e Panjwai to Mushan.³³⁴ The degree to which defending and improving roads in Panjwai in 2008 absorbed the attention of the Canadian battle group confirms the extent to which the Taliban had forced ISAF to defend its own lines of communication, rather than seriously contesting the Taliban's hold over the population. By the second half of 2008, the Canadians realized that holding posts in western Panjwai was of little value if the units stationed there were primarily absorbed with force protection. The Canadians began scaling back their presence in Panjwai, and dismantled their COPs at Talukan and Zangabad in the fall of 2008.³³⁵

NEW TALIBAN LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGY: 2007-2008

The Taliban's ability to contain the Canadians in Zhari and Panjwai allowed them to achieve an important strategic repositioning during 2007. The Taliban's losses during Operation Medusa in 2006, which were estimated to be as high as 1,100,³³⁶ were staggering, given that the Taliban's southern force was estimated to consist of approximately 6,700 fighters during the summer of 2006.³³⁷ The Taliban also suffered the loss of several important commanders in early 2006. A combination of heavy casualties and leadership changes may explain the lack of large scale Taliban offensives in the south in 2007. But while there was no Taliban offensive of the scale seen in 2006 or 2008, the Taliban continued to pursue a subtle but aggressive campaign throughout 2007 with the ultimate goal of retaking Kandahar City. Because of the Taliban's success in tying down the Canadians in Zhari in Panjwai, they were able to pursue two key goals in Kandahar. The Taliban were able to develop institutions of governance in Taliban-held areas of Kandahar, especially in Zhari and Panjwai, as a means of winning legitimacy for the Taliban movement. The Taliban were also to wage a successful offensive to move into Kandahar City from the north through Arghandab District circumventing the ISAF deployment in Zhari and

Panjwai.

The development of new Taliban objectives coincided with a major reconfiguration of senior Taliban leadership. In December 2006, Mullah Omar's deputy, Mullah Akhtar Osmani, was killed by an airstrike in Helmand.³³⁸ Three months later, in March 2007, Mullah Obaidullah, the Taliban's former defense minister and a leading member of the *rahbari shura*, was arrested by the ISI.³³⁹ Then in May 2007, Mullah Dadullah Akhund was killed in Helmand Province.³⁴⁰ Rumors circulated in the wake of Osmani and Dadullah's deaths that both had resulted from politically driven tip-offs.³⁴¹ Whether or not those reports are true, Osmani and Dadullah were known to be fierce rivals.³⁴² The death of Mullah Dadullah led his faction to be sidelined within the QST leadership. Dadullah Akhund's brother, Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, claimed to take the place of his slain brother.³⁴³ But the QST's senior leadership did not recognize Mansoor Dadullah and in December 2007, issued a statement disowning him from their movement.³⁴⁴ The split between Mansoor Dadullah and the QST intensified when the former opened up communications with the British in Helmand province.³⁴⁵ Mansoor Dadullah was captured two months later in February 2008 by Pakistani security forces.³⁴⁶ At the beginning of 2008, Mullah Omar issued an order banning the beheadings of Afghans found guilty of spying for the government.³⁴⁷ Beheadings had been a favored tactic of Mullah Dadullah, and Mullah Omar's order suggests there was a backlash against Dadullah's tactics in the Taliban's high command following his death.³⁴⁸ Debate within the QST over the use of suicide bombings and civilian casualties also intensified in the spring of 2008, following two bloody suicide bombings in February of that year, and the frequency of suicide bombings in Kandahar dropped after Mullah Dadullah's death.³⁴⁹

The loss of Mullahs Osmani, Obaidullah, and Dadullah did not have significant long term effects on the Taliban's capabilities. Some analysts have even suggested that the loss of these commanders benefited the Taliban, by allowing younger, more innovative commanders to replace the older

generation of leaders which led the Taliban in the 1990s.³⁵⁰ This was certainly the case with Mullah Abdur Ghani Baradar, who ascended to operational command over the QST to replace Osmani, Obaidullah, and Dadullah. By October 2007, Baradar was described by the official publication of the Taliban as the organization's deputy leader.³⁵¹ While Mullah Omar remains the nominal head of the organization, he is increasingly removed from direct decision making.³⁵² Mullah Omar is reported to trust Baradar, with whom he has a long relationship. The two men fought together against the Soviets and later established a madrassa together in Maiwand.³⁵³ Baradar, a member of the Popolzai tribe, is known for his "modern, efficient style of command" and for his political and diplomatic savvy.³⁵⁴ Since taking command, Baradar has also worked to increase the centralized Quetta Shura control over the organization.³⁵⁵ To this end, Baradar has established two committees, one to handle complaints from Taliban fighters and commanders, and one to deal with civilian complaints.³⁵⁶ These committees are an attempt to reign in rogue Taliban units and prevent them from feuding with one another or preying upon the local population.³⁵⁷ Since the beginning of 2008, Mullah Baradar's senior field commander and the head of Baradar's military complaints committee has been Mullah Zakir, also known as Abdullah Gulam Rasoul, a former Guantanamo Bay prisoner transferred to Afghan authorities in 2007 and subsequently released.³⁵⁸

Taliban Control in Panjwai and Zhari

The Taliban, while conducting its campaign to keep the Canadians out of Zhari and Panjwai in 2007, moved to consolidate its control over the population and to gain local recognition of the Taliban as the area's legitimate governance structure. Zhari and Panjwai provided a bridgehead for a Taliban campaign focused on drawing the population of Kanadahar away from the government, as the tribal dynamics in the area made some local groups sympathetic to the Taliban. The highly coveted farmland of Zhari and Panjwai is a patchwork of tribal enclaves.³⁵⁹ The Barakzai, Noorzai, and Achakzai have a significant presence, but there are also large pockets of various Ghilzai

sub-tribes.³⁶⁰ With the exception of the Taliban period from 1994 to 2001, the Noorzai and Ghilzai have historically had little connection to the government in Kandahar, and they continued to be marginalized after 2001.³⁶¹

Complicating social relations in Zhari and Panjwai are questions of land ownership and taxation. Historically, large areas of Zhari and Panjwai were owned by Kandahar's tribal aristocracy—the Barakzai, Popolzai, and Achakzai—and worked by Noorzai, Ishaqzai, and Ghilzai peasants.³⁶² There is, however, little information on how the turbulent years of the anti-Soviet jihad, the mujahideen period, and the Taliban's rule in Kandahar have affected the structure of land ownership in these areas. Since 2001, some of the major militia commanders and tribal strongmen who support the Kandahar government have reportedly attempted to increase their landholdings by force.³⁶³

The Taliban has been able to capitalize on this chaotic dynamic by offering local farmers protection against large landholders and strongmen. Because the land relationships are in many cases unclear, the Taliban has been conducting de facto land reform in the major agrarian areas of Zhari and Panjwai by targeting landowners.³⁶⁴ Historically, the Afghan clergy have objected to projects of land reform, insisting that Islam upholds the protection of private property; however, exceptions were made during the anti-Soviet jihad when the clergy often did not support absentee landlords who were accused of abandoning the Muslim cause or of using means to acquire their land, such as usury, that they considered immoral.³⁶⁵ Taliban targeting of large landholders has also been reported in Ghorak district, where the QST has targeted major Popolzai landlords, who have been forced to flee to Kandahar City.³⁶⁶

The Taliban's first step in expanding its control over Zhari and Panjwai was to root out locals who might assist ISAF forces. In December 2006, as the Taliban recovered from Operation Medusa, they reportedly executed twenty-six men in the village of Talukan in Panjwai for cooperating with ISAF troops. The headless bodies were publically displayed and locals were warned that they would

suffer similar consequences for collaboration.³⁶⁷ The Taliban have continued publicly to display the corpses of executed victims as a warning against collaborators,³⁶⁸ although Mullah Omar banned the beheading of informants in 2008, recommending firing squads as an alternative.³⁶⁹ The Taliban's concerns with civilian informants continued into 2008. Some ANA commanders in Zhari and Panjwai were known to distribute cell phones to the population, as cell phones allowed villagers privately to call in tips against the Taliban,³⁷⁰ and ISAF set up a 911-style call center in 2007.³⁷¹ In response, the Taliban demanded in March 2008, that Kandahar's cell phone companies suspend service at night, so that the Taliban could operate safely during those hours.³⁷² When some of Kandahar's service providers refused to acquiesce, the Taliban began destroying cell phone towers.³⁷³ Cell phone companies refused government protection, fearing that it would brand them as connected with the Kandahar government, and several companies eventually gave in to the Taliban's demands.³⁷⁴

The Taliban also directed attacks against government officials in Zhari and Panjwai. In August, 2007, a suicide bomber killed Zhari district chief Khariudin Achakzai and three of his children at their home in Kandahar City.³⁷⁵

Though intimidation and terror compelled dissident elements of the local population into compliance or drove them to seek refuge in Kandahar City, the Taliban also sought to win popular cooperation by providing ordered governance.³⁷⁶ The Taliban's judicial system, regularized taxation, oversight mechanisms, complaints committees, and protection of opium growers all demonstrate a clear concern with winning local support.

Taliban shadow governance is multi-faceted. The Taliban assigns a governor to each province, who plays both a military and a civil role.³⁷⁷ The Taliban governor's primary functions include coordinating the efforts of the commanders working in his province and administering and providing oversight of Taliban finances.³⁷⁸ The Taliban's high command places special emphasis on financial oversight, and explicitly addressed the issue

in a 2006 rulebook approved by Mullah Omar and given to Taliban field commanders.³⁷⁹ The rules specified that, “Taliban may not use Jihad equipment or property for personal ends,” and that each fighter is “accountable to his superiors in matters of money spending and equipment usage.”³⁸⁰ The functions of a Taliban governor accord with nineteenth century traditions of governance in Afghanistan, in which provincial governors were responsible for the maintenance of order, the oversight of regular and paramilitary forces, taxation, and for the exertion of central control in the provinces.³⁸¹

The establishment of *sharia* law courts is another defining aspect of Taliban control. The establishment of Taliban courts has been reported not only in Kandahar and Helmand, but in the provinces surrounding Kabul.³⁸² There are concrete reports of courts operating in areas of Kandahar province, though it is unclear from open source material exactly how many courts the Taliban operate and to what extent the Quetta Shura has standardized its legal procedures.³⁸³ A panel of three or four itinerant judges has traveled through the Maiwand district, for example, ruling on petitions brought before them and punishing guilty parties.³⁸⁴ In Zhari, similar courts carried out twenty-seven executions by 2008.³⁸⁵ By 2008, the Taliban’s traveling judiciary had extended its influence to the towns of Senjaray and Sanzaray, ten miles west of Kandahar City.³⁸⁶ One local farmer reported that the courts in Maiwand and Zhari “deal with a number of cases: land disputes, family disputes, loan disputes, robbery, killing, fighting... and the people are happy with them.”³⁸⁷

The Taliban’s judicial system is backed by its use of force. Taliban courts have the power to serve warrants and subpoena villagers to testify before them.³⁸⁸ The Taliban’s provision for a judiciary system has become a key source for building its legitimacy in Kandahar. Anecdotal evidence suggests Taliban courts are far more efficient and transparent than government-funded courts, and that many locals prefer them for a variety of reasons.³⁸⁹ Not only are local courts corrupt, but they are also inadequate for the size of Kandahar’s population.³⁹⁰ As of June 2009, there were only

eight government judges serving a population of one million Kandaharis, and those judges were unable to travel to many outlying districts.³⁹¹ Pro-government mullahs may have once handled a large number of the cases not addressed by Kandahar’s government judiciary, but the Taliban’s campaign to assassinate them, ongoing since 2003, has limited the influence of these mullahs, many of whom have left public life.³⁹² By targeting judges and mullahs, the Taliban’s use of terror has played a major role in creating a judicial vacuum in Kandahar.

The Taliban’s high command clearly understands the importance of developing a reputation for transparency and orderly conduct amongst the population of Kandahar. To this end, the QST has formed a committee, currently headed by Torak Agha, to investigate civilian complaints against Taliban commanders.³⁹³ The committee’s responsibilities include the review of Taliban accounting practices to ensure that local commanders are not misappropriating funds from locals or embezzling payouts from the Taliban’s central treasury.³⁹⁴ The Quetta Shura Taliban’s oversight procedures also extend to their judiciary system. In Musa Qala, in neighboring Helmand Province, the Taliban appointed a committee to oversee the conduct of the shadow judiciary, which removed from office a Taliban judge found guilty of taking bribes.³⁹⁵ The Taliban’s desire to win public support in occupied areas through their judicial code is also demonstrated by their willingness to moderate the harsh legal prohibitions on entertainment they had taken during their tenure in power during the 1990s. Radio, television, and the shaving of beards are no longer outlawed by the Taliban in Kandahar, although such activities remained rare in many Taliban-controlled villages due to a reigning conservative social culture.³⁹⁶

In their efforts to increase local perception of the Taliban as the legitimate government, the Taliban have required locals in Zhari and Panjwai to obtain Taliban licenses for certain activities.³⁹⁷ Villagers have sought Taliban approval before repairing irrigation systems.³⁹⁸ In one case, Taliban approval specified that machinery used had to be rented from private companies, and not loaned

from the government's agriculture department.³⁹⁹ By banning the use of government development aid, the Taliban further separates the population from ISAF and reinforces the psychological perception that the Taliban is the legitimate local government.

Part of Zhari and Panjwai's value for the Taliban comes from the ability of these areas to sustain the forces based there, and a major source of the Taliban's legitimacy is their ability to assess and collect taxes in a well-regulated manner. A major source of Taliban funding is a *zakat* tax collected from villagers in areas under Taliban control.⁴⁰⁰ The exact tax assessment probably varies from area to area, though in some places the *ushr*, or a ten percent tithe, is collected.⁴⁰¹ As in most agrarian societies, the tax is tied to agricultural production, and is often paid once or twice yearly following major harvests.⁴⁰² Because the *zakat* is in accordance with historical and cultural expectations and because the Taliban is tied to the local population via familial relations, Taliban taxation is in many areas seen as more legitimate than the forms of extortion exerted by the Afghan police, and not heavily resented.⁴⁰³ The Taliban also derives revenues from poppy cultivation in areas under their control.⁴⁰⁴ The Taliban's connection to opium and heroin trafficking remains a subject of debate, but what is clear is that the movement is closely connected to opium cultivation at the lowest levels. Most Taliban fighters are farmers and Taliban campaigns are timed to allow the population to harvest opium fields every April.⁴⁰⁵

The Taliban have benefited from the discontent caused by poppy eradication in Zhari, Panjwai, and Maiwand. Poppy eradication was a favored cause of the Asadullah Khalid administration in Kandahar, and in April of both 2007 and 2008, the Kandahar government launched major eradication campaigns.⁴⁰⁶ The eradication efforts selectively targeted farmers without links to the Kandahar government.⁴⁰⁷ In both years, the campaigns came under intense attack by Taliban forces, and eradication could not be completed in Zhari and Panjwai, especially because the Canadian military refused to support counter-narcotics units.⁴⁰⁸ Successfully defending local opium

farmers both further ingratiated the Taliban with the local population and increased the Taliban's taxation and smuggling revenues.

The Taliban rely on occupied territory in Zhari and Panjwai not only for material support but also for manpower. The Taliban fighting force is composed of a combination of "regular" full time fighters and local recruits or conscripts, whose service may be temporary and seasonal.⁴⁰⁹ Regular fighters were likely to have spent time in Pakistan, and included numbers of madrasa students, recruited in Pakistan but originally from Afghanistan.⁴¹⁰ Since 2006, however, the bulk of the Taliban's force around Kandahar City has consisted of local recruits.⁴¹¹ The Taliban's 2006 rulebook demonstrated that local recruitment was a priority, specifying that "A Taliban commander is permitted to extend an invitation to all Afghans who support infidels so that they may convert to the true Islam."⁴¹² The guidelines applied the Taliban's strict military justice system to Taliban fighters, but also specified that new recruits are protected from executions, a measure presumably intended to prevent fallings out with the communities from which local Taliban are recruited.⁴¹³ Recruitment itself can be best described as somewhere between voluntary service and conscription.⁴¹⁴ In some places, the Taliban have been shown to use a call-up system: families and villagers are expected to provide a number of troops to serve in Taliban field forces, and there are examples of young men joining the Taliban's ranks because they feel a duty to replace older relatives killed in action against ISAF or the ANA.⁴¹⁵

The Taliban were effectively able to cause entire communities to see themselves as Taliban-affiliated. By 2006, the Taliban's campaign of terror against pro-government clerics in Kandahar gave way to actual Taliban territorial control in some parts, and mullahs in rural areas overwhelmingly gave their support to the Taliban.⁴¹⁶ Zhari and Panjwai became support centers for the Taliban, in which local communities not only collaborate with, but often actively aid and participate in, the insurgency. These districts developed into a valuable source of manpower, material, and funding for the Taliban.

THE TALIBAN'S NORTHERN OFFENSIVE

Expanding Taliban Control in Khakrez

Even though the Canadians were unable to exert control over Zhari and Panjwai, the movement of Canadian forces there after Operation Medusa complicated Taliban expansion into Kandahar City from the west. While the Taliban continued to contain the Canadians in Zhari and Panjwai in 2007 and 2008, they organized and conducted a campaign to advance on Kandahar City from the north.⁴¹⁷ The objective of this campaign was the Arghandab district.⁴¹⁸ The densely cultivated district is crisscrossed by canals, thick vegetation, and orchards. Located directly adjacent to Kandahar City, Arghandab is an ideal safehaven from which insurgents can project into the provincial capital. The mujahideen had used the area to this end during the anti-Soviet jihad, and the Taliban intended to use it for the same purpose.⁴¹⁹

The capture of Arghandab required preparatory operations. The region was geographically and politically well-defended. Arghandab district is surrounded to the North and West by a line of hills which formed a protective barrier around the fertile valley. The Arghandab district had long been the homeland of the Alokozai tribe, over which Mullah Naqib had exercised strong control since the 1980s. The Alokozai were known for their military strength, and as long as Naqib's tribal commanders and their militias remained hostile to the Taliban, they posed a serious obstacle to any advance through the Arghandab district.⁴²⁰ The Taliban reportedly maintained a communication channel with Naqib, and attempted to negotiate for his support.⁴²¹ Though long at odds with Governor Sherzai and Wali Karzai, Mullah Naqib remained a firm opponent of the Taliban, and in 2006, Ahmed Wali Karzai was able to renew his alliance with Mullah Naqib, the key Alokozai tribal leader, to shore up Kandahar's northern flank as the Taliban moved into Zhari and Panjwai in 2006.⁴²² Refusing the Taliban's entreaties, Mullah Naqib became a target for assassination and in March 2007, he was injured but not killed in an IED attack on his armored SUV.⁴²³ As long as Mullah Naqib remained alive, he complicated the

Taliban's advance on Arghandab.⁴²⁴

In preparation for their attack on Arghandab, the Taliban maneuvered into Khakrez District during the spring and summer of 2007.⁴²⁵ The most direct approaches to Arghandab District from the north are through a series of passes over the hills separating Arghandab from Khakrez and the valleys of western Shah Wali Kot. Khakrez geographically controls the entrances to these key passes. In addition, the Khakrez district geographically links Zhari and Maiwand—both significant areas of Taliban activity in 2007—to the Taliban bases in Shah Wali Kot district and in the tri-border area where Helmand, Kandahar, and Uruzgan provinces meet. Control of Khakrez would link several key Taliban positions and allow resources from each of these fronts to move into Arghandab district.

ISAF had pulled most its forces out of northern Kandahar to support operations in Zhari and Panjwai in the fall of 2006. With the exception of a small Canadian base guarding the Kandahar to Tarin Kowt Highway and occasional Special Forces activity, the Taliban were left unchallenged in Shah Wali Kot, Khakrez, and the other northern districts of Kandahar from the fall of 2006 to the summer of 2007.⁴²⁶ The Taliban took advantage of ISAF's inattention to move forces into these areas and intimidate the local population. By June of 2007, ISAF intelligence reported a major Taliban troop buildup in Khakrez and Shah Wali Kot, which ISAF claimed included large numbers of Arab and Chechen fighters.⁴²⁷ In response, ISAF and the ANA launched Operation Adalat to root insurgents out of northern Kandahar.⁴²⁸ U.S. Special Forces and ANA troops moved into to Khakrez in early June with the support of Canadian artillery and armor.⁴²⁹ The operation provoked a stronger Taliban response than similar operations elsewhere in Kandahar, suggesting the importance of Khakrez to the Taliban's campaign plan. ISAF supply lines that ran through the hills north of Kandahar City were subject to frequent Taliban IED attacks.⁴³⁰ In the third week of June, the Taliban launched a series of attacks across northern Kandahar and Uruzgan. On June 16, 2007, several hundred Taliban fighters almost

overwhelmed a Dutch post in the Chora District of Uruzgan, outside of Tarin Kowt.⁴³¹ The Taliban subsequently seized the Mianishin district center on June 18 and took the Ghorak district center the next day.⁴³²

These Taliban attacks occurred nearly simultaneously with ISAF Operation Perseverance, launched on June 18, 2007, to clear the Taliban from Khakrez.⁴³³ The ISAF operation culminated on June 22, 2007, with an assault on the town of Padah, a hamlet ten kilometers south of the Khakrez district center used as a Taliban base.⁴³⁴ Despite the deployment of Canadian armor, the Taliban fought the attacking force, losing an estimated forty fighters in the subsequent battle.⁴³⁵ That same week, small Canadian units retook the Ghorak and Mianashin district centers. The Canadians reinstalled the ANP units that had been forced from their posts a week earlier.⁴³⁶

The ANP garrison at Ghorak came under Taliban assault again in early July.⁴³⁷ The ANP column sent to relieve the Ghorak garrison was ambushed by the Taliban in the village of China, which is located in the pass connecting the Ghorak valley with the Maiwand district. The ANP relief force withdrew after a five-hour battle.⁴³⁸ A small Canadian and ANA force returned the next day and successfully relieved Ghorak. This time ANA soldiers assumed command of the garrison.⁴³⁹ They would hold the Ghorak district center for half a year, departing in early 2008 and handing the post over, once more, to the local ANP, who would find themselves besieged in the district center for most of 2008.⁴⁴⁰ The nominal ANA and ANP presence in Ghorak did little to prevent the district from being used as a key Taliban line of communication for Taliban fighters and logistics moving between Helmand and Kandahar.⁴⁴¹

The Taliban's response to coalition operations in Shah Wali Kot and Khakrez during the summer of 2007 fits with their broader design of securing positions from which to attack the Arghandab district. The coalition's Operation Adalat threatened to interfere with this campaign, and the Taliban's complex response, executed with coordinated operations across Northern Kandahar and Uruzgan,

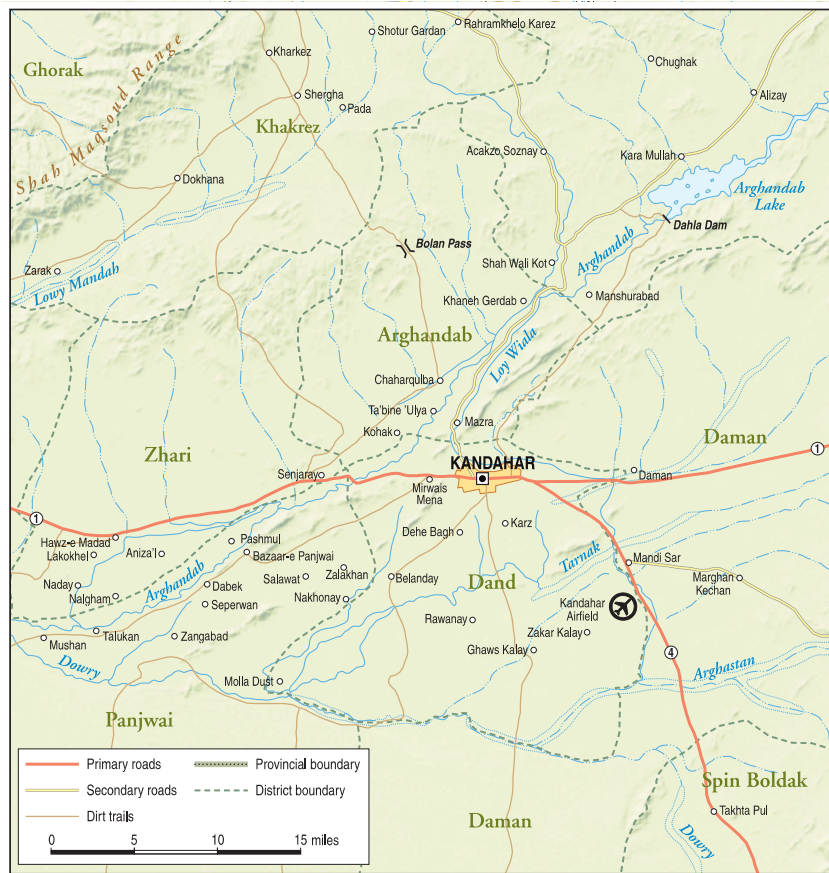
suggests the importance of these districts to the Taliban. The timing of the Taliban's June 2007 attacks on Chora in Uruzgan and the Ghorak and Mianishin district centers, which was simultaneous to coalition operations in Khakrez and Shah Wali Kot, suggests that the Taliban were aiming to stretch Canadian forces thin and distract them from their operations in Khakrez and Shah Wali Kot.⁴⁴² The Taliban's decision to stand and fight a sustained and costly engagement to defend Padah in Khakrez against a coalition attack was also unusual. Padah was reportedly the central strongpoint for the Taliban's occupation of Khakrez, and the Taliban's refusal to evacuate the position confirms its importance.⁴⁴³ The village lies near the entrance to the Boland Pass, which leads from Khakrez into Arghandab, and near the road running into Arghandab along the Soznay stream.⁴⁴⁴

Because the Canadians lacked the resources to hold Khakrez, the June 2007 operation was only a short-term hindrance to the Taliban takeover of the district.⁴⁴⁵ In the fall of 2007, the Taliban increased their force presence in Khakrez,⁴⁴⁶ and by doing so were able to intimidate and co-opt the Khakrez district leadership. The Taliban reportedly bought off the Khakrez district chief in October 2007, and made a deal allowing the Taliban free movement through the district in exchange for a ceasefire with the district's beleaguered police force.⁴⁴⁷ The Khakrez police chief was arrested for his links to the Taliban in May 2008, suggesting he too had been co-opted.⁴⁴⁸

The Taliban Assault into Arghandab

Mullah Naqib died of a heart attack on October 11, 2007.⁴⁴⁹ Several days later, President Karzai arrived in Kandahar and publically crowned Mullah Naqib's twenty-six-year-old son, Karimullah Naqibi, as the new chieftain of the Alokzai tribe.⁴⁵⁰

Karzai's choice undermined the Alokzai tribe's ability to resist the Taliban. Tribal leadership in Pashtun society is semi-meritocratic, rather than strictly hereditary, and tribal leaders, moreover, are traditionally chosen by the tribe and not by outside authorities.⁴⁵¹ Several Alokzai leaders were more natural choices for succession and



MAP 4 | CENTRAL KANDAHAR PROVINCE

would have carried greater authority within the tribe. By crowning Naqibi, Karzai passed over Khan Mohammad, former commander of the ANA 2nd Corps and the senior Alokozai general, and Izzatullah Wasifi, son of former tribal leader Azizullah Wasifi.⁴⁵² Both individuals were not only passed over for leadership, but they had been moved from Kandahar by appointments to the national government several years earlier, perhaps in an effort to move potential Karzai rivals out of Kandahar and away from their power bases. Izzatullah Wasifi was made governor of Farah in 2005, preventing him from contesting for a seat in the Wolesi Jirga, and later made anti-corruption minister in Kabul.⁴⁵³ Khan Mohammad served as an adviser to the Interior Minister in Kabul in 2007 and 2008.⁴⁵⁴ Both Khan Mohammed and Wasifi protested Naqibi's appointment, arguing that President Karzai was not only overstepping his role by interfering in Alokozai

tribal affairs, but also jeopardizing Kandahar's security for his own political ends.⁴⁵⁵

The young Karimullah Naqibi was poorly qualified for tribal leadership. Naqibi lacked military and political experience, demonstrated by his complete failure to coordinate the Alokozai defense of Arghandab in 2007.⁴⁵⁶ He was indecisive, failed to win the popular support enjoyed by his father, and lacked standing among the Kandahar government, where he was treated by Governor Khalid "like a rag doll."⁴⁵⁷ The Karzais, for their part, were employing a familiar strategy by fracturing rival tribes in Kandahar, and limiting the independence of their leadership.⁴⁵⁸ The Alokozai were a major target of this campaign because Wali Karzai was concerned about that tribe's power.⁴⁵⁹ The Karzais' strategy had been employed previously against the Alokozai when Alokozai provincial police chief Zabit Akrem was moved to Mazar-e Sherif in 2003.⁴⁶⁰ The inter-

vention by the Karzais in 2007, though perhaps politically expedient at the time, was shortsighted, as it created a leadership vacuum within the Alokozai tribe and weakened its ability to resist the Taliban.

The Taliban saw Mullah Naqib's death and Karimullah Naqibi's succession as a key strategic opportunity. Within weeks, Taliban fighters had surged into Khakrez, completing the Taliban occupation of the district and putting the Taliban in a position from which to attack Arghandab.⁴⁶¹ In late October 2007, the Taliban began an intimidation campaign in Arghandab, making brief raids into the outskirts of the district and urging Alokozai police and military commanders to follow their kinsmen in Khakrez and surrender to the Taliban.⁴⁶² The main Taliban attack on Arghandab came on October 28, 2007. By the next day, several hundred Taliban captured the northern bank of the Arghandab River.⁴⁶³ The Taliban offensive was a humiliation for the Alokozai militias, which put up little resistance.⁴⁶⁴ During the incursion, the Taliban publically stated, "we are not here to fight; we are here to preach... to make the people aware to not help the infidels and their cronies."⁴⁶⁵ The Taliban's attack was, however, clearly designed to impress upon the local population their military capabilities. The Taliban targeted sites of symbolic significance to the Alokozai, including the village of Chahar Ghulba, the stronghold of Mullah Naqib.⁴⁶⁶ Under Naqib's leadership, Chahar Ghulba had successfully withstood a month-long Soviet assault in a legendary 1987 battle.⁴⁶⁷ But his son Naqibi lost the village to the Taliban in a day, and public confidence in Alokozai tribal leadership suffered a severe blow.⁴⁶⁸ The Taliban's advance triggered the mass exodus of Arghandab's residents, many of whom fled into Kandahar City.⁴⁶⁹

On October 31, 2007, an ANA battalion and roughly 180 ANP launched an assault to retake the northern bank of the Arghandab River.⁴⁷⁰ Canadian forces were focused on Zhari and Panjwai when the Arghandab invasion took place, and were only able to send a small force in support of the Afghan units.⁴⁷¹ The Taliban did not attempt to hold their recently-captured positions and

withdrew. The ANA killed or wounded dozens of fleeing fighters.⁴⁷²

The Taliban's attack into Arghandab was the result of a planned campaign focused on taking an important strategic objective, accelerated to respond to Mullah Naqib's death. Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi asserted during the attack that "we have always been looking for a chance to take Arghandab... Now we have a chance."⁴⁷³ The Arghandab incursion demonstrated that the Taliban was not only capable of long-range strategic planning, but also that they were able to rapidly adjust their plans to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities.

The Taliban's 2008 Arghandab Campaign

The October 2007 Taliban assault on Arghandab District marked the beginning of an intense campaign to erode the will of the population in Arghandab to resist Taliban control. The most effective aspects of this Taliban intimidation were continued efforts that took advantage of the death of Mullah Naqib and the weakness of his successor in an attempt to destroy or intimidate anti-Taliban leadership within the Alokozai tribe. On February 17, 2008, Abdul Hakeem, Alokozai strongman and chief of the auxiliary police in Arghandab, was killed in a massive suicide attack at a dog fighting match in Kandahar City.⁴⁷⁴ Hakeem had been a fierce opponent of the Taliban since the 1990s, and his militia had played a key role in resisting Taliban infiltration.⁴⁷⁵ Four months later, Muhammad Akbar Khakrezwal another key Alokozai leader advisor to Karimullah Naqibi, and brother of slain Kandahar and Kabul police chief Zabit Akrem, was killed by gunmen in Kandahar City, leaving the young Naqibi without one his strongest aides.⁴⁷⁶

The Taliban also conducted frequent attacks on the ANP in Arghandab. Within weeks of the October 2007 battle for Arghandab, the Taliban began staging nighttime small arms fire attacks on police compounds.⁴⁷⁷ In several of these attacks, the Taliban successfully overran ANP positions.⁴⁷⁸ In mid-April 2008, for example, the Taliban killed eleven police officers and seized vehicles and weapons during a nighttime raid on an ANP

post in Arghandab district.⁴⁷⁹ The insurgents also employed more grisly methods to terrorize the ANP in Arghandab. In one incident, thirteen ANP officers in Arghandab District were killed when a Taliban infiltrator invited a police unit to his home, where the officers were drugged and their throats slit.⁴⁸⁰ As the Arghandab district became more permissive for the Taliban they began to conduct IED attacks against ISAF convoys moving through the district.⁴⁸¹ The Canadians suffered their first casualty from IED attacks on the road connecting Kandahar City to FOB Frontenac in January 2008.⁴⁸²

ISAF, meanwhile, offered little resistance to the Taliban's takeover of Arghandab. In December 2007, ISAF commander General Dan McNeill visited Arghandab and promised an ISAF base to defend the district against further Taliban incursions.⁴⁸³ Two months later, in February 2008, the Canadians opened FOB Frontenac on Lake Arghandab, about thirty kilometers northwest of the Arghandab district center.⁴⁸⁴ FOB Frontenac guarded the Kandahar-Tarin Kowt Highway, defending one of several routes by which the Taliban could infiltrate Arghandab.⁴⁸⁵ But far from the populated areas of Arghandab District, the FOB was ultimately too remote and the unit stationed there too small to effectively defend the population of the Arghandab district against the Taliban's 2008 intimidation campaign.

ISAF's attempts to shore up Arghandab mistakenly tried to counter the Taliban intimidation campaign with development assistance. The small unit assigned to FOB Frontenac devoted much of its energy to attempting to meet the district's development needs rather than providing security.⁴⁸⁶ In addition, the remote location of FOB Frontenac may have been chosen for development purposes. The new FOB overlooked the Dahla Dam, which controlled water flow to the entire Arghandab River Valley.⁴⁸⁷ The report of the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan, a Canadian Parliamentary investigation released in January 2008, and better known as the Manley Report, called for a "signature development project."⁴⁸⁸ Understanding that implementation of the Manley Report's guidelines

was a condition for Canadian Parliamentary support of the war, the Canadian forces identified the Dahla Dam as a starting point for their signature project.⁴⁸⁹ In June 2008, the Canadian government pledged \$50 million for renovations on the dam.⁴⁹⁰ Unlike the Kajaki Dam in neighboring Helmand, the Dahla Dam never became a target of Taliban attacks, and over the summer of 2008 Canadian soldiers came to call FOB Frontenac "FOB Fabulous" for its picturesque scenery and relative tranquility,⁴⁹¹ even as the Taliban gradually seized the district the post was meant to defend.

The Sarpoza Prison Break

The Taliban intensified their intimidation campaign in Arghandab during the summer of 2008 with a second dramatic incursion into the district. The June 2008 Arghandab raid was the most sophisticated raid carried out by the Quetta Shura Taliban, and demonstrated the organization's growing operational capabilities.

In a brazen attack on the evening of June 13, 2008, an explosives-laden tanker detonated in front of the main gate of Sarpoza Prison, on the western outskirts of Kandahar City.⁴⁹² Minutes later, a suicide bomber blew open the prison's back gate.⁴⁹³ Dozens of Taliban fighters on motorcycles streamed in through the breaches to gun down the prison's guards and release Sarpoza's prisoners.⁴⁹⁴ Some 400 Taliban prisoners, including a number of commanders, successfully fled the area on buses which the Taliban had waiting outside.⁴⁹⁵ Hundreds of other prisoners escaped as well; an estimated 1,100 total inmates were missing after the Taliban attack.⁴⁹⁶

The prison break was a spectacular Taliban propaganda victory, showing Kandaharis that the government and ISAF were unable to defend high value targets within the city, and giving Taliban fighters hope that capture would not permanently remove them from the battlefield. In addition, the Taliban attack on the Sarpoza prison occurred a month after prisoners had gone on a hunger strike to protest poor treatment.⁴⁹⁷ Government MPs had secured promises of reform from Kabul, but by emptying the prison the Taliban had decisively remedied a problem the government had

been unable to solve.⁴⁹⁸

The prison break was not intended as a standalone incident, but as the opening move in a larger operation. Two days after the prison break, Taliban fighters surged into Arghandab district, replaying their assault of the previous autumn.⁴⁹⁹ The Taliban once again easily overwhelmed the local resistance north of the Arghandab River, and hundreds of villagers fled the area.⁵⁰⁰ Once in control of the northern bank, the Taliban mined large areas and destroyed bridges across the Arghandab River, in an effort to slow an ISAF counterattack.⁵⁰¹ ANSF and ISAF responded quickly to the Taliban incursion, launching a counterattack led by ANA units supported by ISAF ground and air units.⁵⁰² Additional ANA units were airlifted from Kabul to respond to a potential Taliban assault on Kandahar City, but the insurgents either fled Arghandab ahead of the ANA's attack or went to ground.⁵⁰³

Some sources suggest that the Taliban used fighters liberated from Sarpoza prison to conduct the subsequent attack on Arghandab district.⁵⁰⁴ But evidence suggests that the Taliban began massing troops at least a week before the attack on Arghandab.⁵⁰⁵ Moreover, some of the Taliban

escapees fled west, away from Arghandab. In the immediate aftermath of the prison break, Canadian troops deployed to the Panjwai area, and ISAF operations to recapture Taliban escapees were conducted as far afield as Maiwand district, fifty miles west of Kandahar City.⁵⁰⁶ It is more plausible that the Taliban withdrew their liberated prisoners to the west to distract ISAF forces from Kandahar's northern flank, and that the Taliban then used a separate force to invade the Arghandab district.⁵⁰⁷

THE COLLAPSE OF SECURITY IN KANDAHAR: 2008-2009

The Sarpoza Prison break and the second attack on Arghandab signaled a critical turning point in the Taliban's campaign for Kandahar. In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's military invasion of Arghandab, Taliban spokesman Yusef Ahmadi announced that the Khalid bin Waleed suicide bombing cell had deployed to Kandahar City for attacks against the government and the Afghan police.⁵⁰⁸ The announcement heralded the Taliban's increased capabilities for projecting violence into Kandahar City, and in the months after Sarpoza, the Taliban established the key



MAP 5 | KANDAHAR CITY

bases and infiltration routes needed to launch the next stage of their campaign to take Kandahar City. The most important of these Taliban bases in the areas surrounding Kandahar City was in Arghandab, which the Taliban contested during the summer of 2008. Positions to the west and southwest of Kandahar City also played important roles in facilitating the Taliban's projection of force into Kandahar City.

The Taliban System in Kandahar City and its Populated Surrounding Areas

By June 2008, the Taliban had killed many of the Alokozai tribe's key leaders in Arghandab, leaving no one to rally the tribe against the Taliban.⁵⁰⁹ After Sarpoza, the Taliban continued their intimidation campaign by aiming at mid-level district and tribal leaders. At the end of July, gunmen killed two Alokozai tribal elders, Bacha Khan and Haji Padshah, along with their family members in Arghandab district.⁵¹⁰ The same evening the son of another tribal elder was killed and eight others were kidnapped from several Arghandab villages.⁵¹¹ Several of those kidnapped had worked with the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team on development projects in Arghandab,⁵¹² and three were killed by the Taliban as a warning to other collaborators.⁵¹³ After the summer's attacks and intimidation campaign, local resistance to the Taliban was limited, and Arghandab slipped under Taliban control.⁵¹⁴ The Taliban were able to move their shadow court for Kandahar City from Khakrez to the much more convenient Arghandab district.⁵¹⁵ Arghandab also became much more permissive for Taliban IED cells.⁵¹⁶ IED attacks against ISAF forces moving through Arghandab became frequent throughout the fall of 2008 and spring of 2009.⁵¹⁷ In early 2009, the Taliban deployed an advisory unit of foreign fighters to train IED cells operating in Arghandab.⁵¹⁸

Taliban positions in Arghandab were supported by several additional infiltration routes in Kandahar's suburbs. The Taliban's takeover of Arghandab occurred simultaneously with a successful campaign to take Senjaray and Sanzaray, two neighboring towns on Highway One, located ten miles west of Kandahar City.⁵¹⁹ Senjaray and

Sanzaray sit on the border of Arghandab district and Zhari district, and Taliban control of these towns geographically linked their positions in the Zhari to positions in Arghandab, strengthening the Taliban presence on the northern bank of the Arghandab River. The area surrounding the towns of Senjaray and Sanzaray, on the border of Zhari and Arghandab districts, also fell to the Taliban during the summer of 2008.⁵²⁰ As in Arghandab, Taliban infiltration was facilitated by high level assassinations. The area surrounding Senjaray and Sanzaray had been under the firm control of Member of Parliament and Alizai strongman Habibullah Jan since 2001.⁵²¹ Though Jan had an uneasy relationship with Wali Karzai, he also resisted Taliban encroachments on his stronghold.⁵²² Jan was assassinated in Sanzaray after visiting an ANA compound on July 5, 2008.⁵²³ And in the months that followed, the Taliban assassinated seven more leading members of the Alizai tribe.⁵²⁴ These assassinations successfully intimidated the population into accepting, or at least not resisting, Taliban control.⁵²⁵ Taliban control over the area was evident by October 2008, when they held a special prayer session in Senjaray to mark the Eid festival.⁵²⁶ Thousands attended, and the Taliban even provided their own security.⁵²⁷ Taliban courts have also operated in Senjaray.⁵²⁸ After the Taliban took control of the area, Senjaray and Sanzaray became a permissive environment for IED assembly.⁵²⁹ Senjaray's location allows it to serve both as a transit point for moving supplies into Kandahar City and as a base for attacks on ISAF and ANSF units moving along Highway One.⁵³⁰ In December 2008, the ANA confirmed the operation of Taliban IED cells in Senjaray when they destroyed two bomb-making compounds there. The cells were part of the network of Shahir Sahib, a Taliban commander known to operate IED cells in Zhari and Maiwand.⁵³¹

From forward bases in Arghandab and Senjaray, the Taliban are able to move weapons, fighters, and IEDs or IED components into safe houses in several neighborhoods of Kandahar City.⁵³² The major area of Taliban activity inside Kandahar City is Police District Nine, which includes the Loy Wiyala neighborhood.⁵³³ District Nine lies

to the north of Kandahar City, separated from the city center by the Loy Wala canal which carries water into the city from Arghandab River. As Kandahar's northern suburb, it borders Arghandab district, giving the Taliban easy access to the area. District Nine, which includes numerous slums, has seen rapid population growth in the past decade, growing to an estimated population of 90,000 residents as people fled from rural areas of the province into Kandahar City. This area also suffers from a severely under-resourced police force. As of December 2008, the 90,000 person neighborhood was policed by sixty-three members of the ANP, making the police to population ratio 1 to 1,400.⁵³⁴ The police presence in the district was not only severely undersized, but also undersupplied, lacking heated quarters, reliable equipment, and even suffering from restricted food rations.⁵³⁵ Embedded ISAF police mentors are also spread thin. Before the summer 2009 deployment of an additional Military Police battalion to mentor ANP units in Kandahar City, District Nine shared only thirteen U.S. police trainers with Police Districts Six and Eight.⁵³⁶

On account of these conditions, District Nine is home to Taliban safehouses, which are used to support attacks throughout Kandahar City.⁵³⁷ Since 2006, the Taliban have been known to operate cells in the area, tasked with compiling lists of government collaborators and targeting them.⁵³⁸ General Sher Muhammad Zazai, commander of the ANA 205th Corps, called it "a precarious area which was used by Taliban fighters for attacking foreign and ANA soldiers,"⁵³⁹ and in 2008, ninety percent of the IEDs found or detonated in Kandahar City were in District Nine.⁵⁴⁰ In 2009, the ANA, ANP, and NDS conducted a number of major raids in the district which led to the detention of multiple insurgents and the discovery of large weapons caches.⁵⁴¹ In early May 2009, 1,000 ANA and 500 ANP conducted multiple raids in Kandahar

city.⁵⁴² In District Nine, these operations led to the arrest of dozens of insurgents and uncovered massive caches of weapons and bomb-making materials.⁵⁴³

A second Taliban base for operation in Kandahar City is the Mirwais Mena area, which overlaps with Police District Seven. Mirwais Mena sits along Highway One, four miles west of the Kandahar City center and halfway between the Taliban's base in Senjaray and the city center. The number of Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs), or car bombs, discovered in Mirwais Mena suggests the Taliban use the area as a final assembly point for VBIEDs used for attacks in the city center.⁵⁴⁴ On multiple occasions since the summer of 2008, Afghan Security Forces have seized VBIEDs, including explosives laden trucks, and detained insurgents in the Mirwais Mena area.⁵⁴⁵ Because VBIEDs are often disabled by traveling long distances on unpaved surfaces, and because the only paved roads leading into Kandahar City from the east pass through Mirwais Mena, the area is strategically positioned to serve as a staging ground and possible assembly area for car

The police presence in the district was not only severely undersized, but also undersupplied, lacking heated quarters, reliable equipment, and even suffering from restricted food rations.

bombs.

A third Taliban base for operations into Kandahar City is in the southwestern suburbs near the villages of Nakhoney and Belanday, ten miles away from the city center.⁵⁴⁶ As discussed above, these villages are known as Taliban bases supporting IED factories, safe houses, weapons caches, and field hospitals.⁵⁴⁷ Based on their proximity to Kandahar Airfield and important Canadian lines of communications into Panjwai, a major purpose of these bases is to support IED attacks on ISAF in Zhari and Panjwai.⁵⁴⁸ But Taliban insurgents and supplies are also known to run into Kandahar from the southwest, suggesting that the Taliban began to use these bases for attack on their primary objective: Kandahar City.⁵⁴⁹ Nakhoney is

linked by a number of roads to the known Taliban safe houses in Sarpoza and Mirwais Mena areas west of Kandahar City, and it is also linked to the Malajat area, a series of suburbs in Police District Six in southwest Kandahar City, where the Taliban have been developing an additional series of safe houses and bases.⁵⁵⁰ Malajat was a key staging ground for mujahideen attacks into Kandahar City in the 1980s, though the Taliban do not have the same foothold in neighboring Dand District as did the mujahideen.⁵⁵¹ Though ANP operate in the Malajat, their limited capabilities have made the area a permissive environment for the Taliban.⁵⁵² ANP units investigating compounds in the Malajat area in July 2008 were engaged by insurgent gunfire,⁵⁵³ and a week later arrested two major Taliban IED facilitators in the same area.⁵⁵⁴

There is limited reporting in open source materials on the extent of Taliban entrenchment in the southern suburbs between the fall of 2008 and the summer of 2009, though the Taliban did conduct frequent assassinations in this area during this period.⁵⁵⁵ This limited reporting may stem from a limited presence of ANSF or ISAF forces in the district, and therefore more limited eyes and ears on the ground, but the lack of reporting may also indicate that the Taliban were able to operate in the district uncontested.⁵⁵⁶ A November 2009 discovery by the ANP and U.S. forces of 500,000 pounds of ammonium nitrate in two compounds in the southern part of Kandahar City along with some 2,000 bomb making components, suggests that the last explanation is the most plausible, and that the area has served as a significant, almost uncontested, Taliban base.⁵⁵⁷ Still, this explanation cannot be proved conclusively from the open source.

Projecting Force into Kandahar City

Establishing control over Arghandab and building support networks in the northern, western, and southwestern belts of Kandahar City dramatically increased the Taliban's ability to wage a campaign of intimidation and terror in Kandahar City. The Taliban's assault on targets in Kandahar City has been more subtle than a conventional military takeover. With the belief that it is the government

in exile, the Taliban has attempted to systematically dismantle the organs of the Afghan government in Kandahar City through assassinations and terror and replace them with its own institutions.⁵⁵⁸ By violently undermining the Afghan government and by intimidating the general population, the Taliban has gradually expanded its control to the population of Kandahar City without having to challenge ISAF and the Afghan Government in conventional battles.⁵⁵⁹

The Taliban publically announced its objectives in Kandahar in April 2009, when the QST's senior leadership launched Operation *Nasrat*.⁵⁶⁰ The Taliban's spokesman specified that the operation would include both targeted assassinations against Afghan government officials and continued attacks against ISAF.⁵⁶¹ "Our targets will be the units of the invading forces, diplomatic stations, convoys, ranking officials of the puppet government, MPs, and employees of the defence, interior and intelligence ministries," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid announced in April 2009.⁵⁶²

The central element of the Taliban's campaign to diminish the influence of the Afghan Government in Kandahar City has been a wave of assassinations, each of which has been carefully chosen both to degrade government capabilities and exert a psychological influence over the population.⁵⁶³ Primary targets for the Taliban included leading figures in Kandahar's security organizations, which are the movement's chief competitor for influence. In September 2008, the Taliban assassinated Tor Jan, a key Barakzai militia commander and former commander of the security force for the Kandahar PRT.⁵⁶⁴ Later, in May 2009, the Taliban killed Mohammad Zamam Khan, a senior commander working for the American security firm US Protection and Investigation (USPI). Zaman Khan was a leader of the Wali Karzai-affiliated Popolzai militia which had been integrated into USPI.⁵⁶⁵ Another major contractor and ally of the Karzais, Taj Mohammad, was killed in an attack in October 2009.⁵⁶⁶

The NDS was another major Taliban target. Azizollah Noori, Kandahar's deputy intelligence

chief, was killed in November 2008, and the Taliban attempted two dramatic but failed attacks on NDS Headquarters in August and September 2009.⁵⁶⁷ In addition to using assassinations, the Taliban targeted these organizations with suicide bomb and IED attacks. Complex suicide and VBIED attacks were carried out against both the Kandahar Police Headquarters and the NDS Headquarters in Kandahar.⁵⁶⁸ In August 2009, a massive truck bomb detonated in central Kandahar City, killing forty-three civilians, injuring sixty others, and flattening nearby buildings.⁵⁶⁹ The blast occurred outside the offices of Pakistani and Japanese construction companies, but local residents speculated that the attack was intended for the nearby NDS headquarters, and that the car bomb detonated prematurely.⁵⁷⁰

The leadership of the various Afghan police units also came under attack. The Taliban conducted a double suicide bombing at the Kandahar City Police Office in September 2008.⁵⁷¹ Their target may have been the influential Achakzai border police commander Abdul Razzak, who escaped with only minor wounds.⁵⁷² These attacks continued throughout late 2008, as Taliban gunmen also attacked mid-level police officials at their homes.⁵⁷³

The second key constituency that competes with the Taliban for influence in Kandahar is religious: mullahs who are either sympathetic to the government or resistant to the Taliban. The clergy in Kandahar have historically played an important role in influencing public opinion.⁵⁷⁴ Removing clerics who oppose the Taliban's message has been integral to the Taliban's strategy for obtaining political legitimacy in Kandahar. To that end, pro-government clerics have been singled out for assassinations since 2002, although there was a surge in Taliban targeting of pro-government mullahs in early 2009.⁵⁷⁵ Two leading members of Kandahar's Ulemma Council were shot dead while leaving their mosques in January 2009.⁵⁷⁶ The Kandahar Ulemma Council had played a leading role in countering Taliban propaganda, vocally countering the preaching of Taliban clerics and criticizing the insurgents' conception of jihad as un-Islamic.⁵⁷⁷ The January murders brought the total number of clerics of the 150-strong

Ulemma Shura assassinated by the Taliban from 2002 to the beginning of 2009 to twenty-four.⁵⁷⁸ More clerics were assassinated in March and April 2009, including Imam Qari Syed Ahmad, chief cleric of a major Kandahar mosque and director of Kandahar's religious department.⁵⁷⁹ A further assassination, that of leading Kandahar cleric Qari Sayed Ahmad, was ordered directly by senior QST leadership, perhaps an indication of the priority that the Taliban's high command gives to the elimination of rival clerics.⁵⁸⁰ In the face of such threats, many of the remaining pro-government clerics moved into ANA compounds in Kandahar City.⁵⁸¹ They were forced to do much of their preaching by radio, not in person, and only traveled through Kandahar with large security details.⁵⁸² The Taliban's assassination campaign thus had the intended effect of limiting the influence of these pro-government mullahs by isolating them from the people of Kandahar.

The Taliban's attempt to undermine the Afghan government has led the organization to target additional groups of Kandahar's civilian administrators. Throughout 2008 and 2009, the Taliban issued warnings to employees of the provincial and national governments in Kandahar, telling them to resign from their posts or face assassination.⁵⁸³ Government officials killed by the Taliban included a Kandahar high court judge,⁵⁸⁴ the deputy head of Kandahar's water and power department,⁵⁸⁵ the head of the Kandahar provincial social affairs department,⁵⁸⁶ and the chief of the Kandahar public bus service.⁵⁸⁷ The Taliban also made unsuccessful assassination attempts against Mohammad Hashim Granai, head of the Zabul provincial council (who resides in Kandahar), and the mayor of Kandahar, Ghulam Haider Hamidi.⁵⁸⁸ Assassinations became less frequent during the summer of 2009 as by that time, many of Kandahar's prominent government officials, including parliamentary representatives, had taken up permanent residence in Kabul.

The Taliban have also targeted the limited number of women who have entered public life in Kandahar. Malalai Kakar, head of the Kandahar department of crimes against women and one of Afghanistan's most prominent female police officers,

was gunned down outside her home in September 2008.⁵⁸⁹ Sitra Achakzai, a female member of the Kandahar Provincial Council and prominent women rights advocate was gunned down on April 12, 2009.⁵⁹⁰ Reminiscent of their rule in the 1990s, the Taliban continued to target girls' schools; in November, 2008 a group of Taliban on motorcycle attacked female students on their way the Mirawais Mena Girl's School with acid, hospitalizing and disfiguring many of the girls.⁵⁹¹

In addition to targeted assassinations, the Taliban began conducting increasingly complex, coordinated suicide bombings against well-protected government targets in the fall of 2008. These attacks demonstrate increased Taliban tactical sophistication and their ability to conduct coordinated assaults in Kandahar City. A number of these attacks involved multiple suicide bombers or increasingly powerful VBIEDs. A fuel tanker detonated outside the offices of the Kandahar provincial council on November 12, 2009, targeting a provincial council meeting and the council's chief, Wali Karzai. Six civilians were killed, and forty-two were injured, including two members of the council.⁵⁹² At least three suicide bombers simultaneously attacked the heavily fortified Kandahar Governor's compound in April 2009, killing five ANP officers.⁵⁹³

In a second dramatic attack on the Kandahar Provincial Council in April 2009, a Suicide VBIED (SVBIED) detonated at the compound's gates. Three suicide bombers dressed in ANA uniforms assaulted the compound immediately after the explosion, firing Kalashnikovs. One of the bombers successfully detonated his bomb, while the other two were killed. There was a scheduled shura of Afghan elders when the suicide bombers struck, and Ahmed Wali Karzai was also in the compound. The attack killed the provincial director of education and the deputy health director.⁵⁹⁴ The police did succeed in foiling several attacks, discovering an SUV packed with 400 kg of explosives, intended for a suicide attack on the governor's office in January 2009, and thwarting another planned suicide attack on a government ministry building in February 2009.⁵⁹⁵

A persistent target of these dramatic attacks was Ahmed Wali Karzai.⁵⁹⁶ Ahmed Wali Karzai's convoy was ambushed in May 2009 outside of Kandahar Province, by gunmen in Surobi District of Kabul Province, as Wali Karzai returned from a publicized meeting with Gul Agha Sherzai in Jalalabad.⁵⁹⁷ These repeated and well-planned attacks on highly-protected targets are evidence of the priority the insurgency has given to removing Ahmed Wali Karzai.

The Taliban also escalated IED attacks against ANP, ANA and ISAF units. The Taliban began a campaign of IED attacks on ISAF convoys and patrols in Kandahar City in the immediate aftermath of the Sarpoza prison break with a series of IED attacks in June and July 2008.⁵⁹⁸ The major target of Taliban IED attacks in Kandahar City, however, was the ANA and ANP; ISAF was more frequently targeted along its major LOCs in Panjwai and Zhari.

The frequency of Taliban IED attacks increased steadily in 2008 and 2009. IED attacks from April to June 2009 were 108 percent higher than in the same period in 2008.⁵⁹⁹ ANA and ANP patrols and convoys were targeted almost weekly by IEDs hidden along major routes passing through the Kandahar City.⁶⁰⁰ IEDs were frequently deployed on motorcycles or bicycles, though the Taliban also used rickshaws and even donkeys.⁶⁰¹ In addition to the Afghan security forces, the Taliban also targeted private security companies supporting ISAF.⁶⁰²

In addition to attempting to destroy the Afghan Government in Kandahar, the Taliban have waged a parallel campaign to exert control over Kandahari citizens. Since late 2008, Taliban infiltration in Kandahar City has allowed the insurgents to carry out the threats articulated in their night letters.⁶⁰³ The Taliban are reported to have established networks of informants within Kandahar City to report on citizens who cooperate with the government and in many areas the Taliban have personalized their night letters, delivering threats to specific individuals.⁶⁰⁴ In 2009, groups of Taliban fighters began conducting nighttime patrols and raids in some areas of Kandahar City,

occasionally engaging ANP units with small arms fire.⁶⁰⁵ The Taliban's nighttime patrols increase public fear of Taliban retribution by projecting the perception of heightened Taliban capabilities in Kandahar City.⁶⁰⁶ Yet, Taliban shadow governance in Kandahar City does appear more limited than it is outside the capital. There is no open source evidence that the Taliban have regular or standardized taxation in Kandahar City. Instead, they are known to visit houses at night and forcefully demand food and supplies.⁶⁰⁷ And while the Taliban do not run courts in the city itself, they do summon individuals in Kandahar City to appear before courts established in 2008 in Arghandab District.⁶⁰⁸

The net effect of Taliban assassination, suicide bombings, attacks on police, nightly patrols, and intimidation has been to convince the population of Kandahar that the government of Afghanistan is unable to provide security against the Taliban.⁶⁰⁹ An informal survey of tribal leaders and former mujahideen commanders in Kandahar City conducted in November 2008 showed that the vast majority believed Kandahar City would fall to the Taliban within the next twelve months.⁶¹⁰ That fear, combined with functioning Taliban tribunals and governance structures in the populated areas surrounding Kandahar City, has given the Taliban de facto influence over much of the population of Kandahar City.⁶¹¹ Believing Taliban control likely, the population is unwilling to contest their authority, and a wide range of local and mid-level leaders since 2007-2008 refused to take sides against the Taliban out of fear.⁶¹² In this way, the Taliban has made significant progress in taking over Kandahar City without having to wage a conventional battle. Taliban control of Kandahar City will not be reversed until the Taliban's ability to control the city's population through the use of violence and intimidation is overturned.

The expansion of Taliban control in Kandahar does not mean the Taliban is broadly welcomed, but rather that many locals are unwilling to act on their resentment. Taliban suicide bombers and IEDs have killed increasing numbers of civilians since 2008, despite the organization's stated policy of avoiding civilian casualties.⁶¹³

The Taliban's campaign to terrorize government supporters has also led to several indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets, including a massacre of thirty passengers on a civilian bus traveling through Maiwand district in October 2008, and rocket attacks on Kandahar City before the August 20, 2009 election.⁶¹⁴ These attacks against civilians have come as NATO has taken dramatic measures to limit civilian casualties.⁶¹⁵ From May to September 2009, civilian casualties caused by the Taliban rose by twenty percent, while civilian casualties caused by NATO in that same period decreased by eighty percent.⁶¹⁶ However, the Taliban have worked to mitigate backlash against the violence they have inflicted through an effective information operations campaign blaming NATO for violence and casualties inflicted by the Taliban. Kandaharis staged a public protest blaming Canadian troops when handicapped children were killed in an explosion in February 2009.⁶¹⁷ A subsequent ISAF investigation concluded that the deaths were caused by an enemy IED; however, this did not alter public perception.⁶¹⁸ In subsequent months, a number of additional protests were staged in Kandahar over claims of civilian deaths, which NATO steadfastly denied.⁶¹⁹

ISAF'S RESPONSE TO TALIBAN EXPANSION

The Taliban met minimal ISAF resistance as they expanded their control over Arghandab, Kandahar City, and its suburbs in 2008 and 2009. During this critical period, ISAF focused its resources in southern Afghanistan on fighting in Helmand and border interdiction.⁶²⁰ This focus resulted in the assignment of forces to areas where they did little to improve the security of Kandahar City.⁶²¹ When General Stanley McChrystal took command of ISAF in 2009 and began reviewing the situation, ISAF reassessed the importance of Kandahar City, which McChrystal identified as the primary geographical objective of QST operations in southern Afghanistan.⁶²² But the U.S. reinforcements that arrived in the summer of 2009 arrived in positions largely determined by General McChrystal's predecessor, General David McKiernan, and as a result only a minority

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS IN KANDAHAR

December 7, 1979	Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.	Summer 2007	The Taliban shift their strategic focus to Khakrez and Arghandab districts north of Kandahar City for an eventual push south towards the provincial capital.
1980s	Mujahideen resistance to the Soviets in Kandahar.		
1987-1989	Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.		
October 1994	Taliban rise to power in Kandahar.	October 2007	Following the death of Mullah Naqib, the Taliban launch an assault on the Arghandab district.
December 2001	Taliban ousted from Kandahar by U.S. Special Forces and their Popalzai, Barakzai, and Alokozai militia allies.	Spring 2008	The Taliban continue their intimidation campaign in Arghandab in an effort to solidify their control over the district. ISAF offers little resistance to the growing Taliban presence. ISAF and ANA are fought to a stalemate in Zhari and Panjwai. Canadian forces scale down their presence in Zhari and Panjwai.
2002	Taliban leadership reorganizes in Quetta, Pakistan.		
2004	The Taliban attempt to advance against Kandahar City from their bases in Uruzgan, Zabul, and Shah Wali Kot. They are checked by a battalion of U.S. forces.		
September 2004	205 th Corps of the ANA is stood up.	Summer 2008	The Taliban contest and eventually gain control of Senjaray and Sanzaray, approximately ten miles west of Kandahar City.
2005	The Taliban work to extend their lines of communication from their bases in the Uruzgan, Zabul, and Shah Wali Kot westward, to secure major east-west route into northern Helmand in order to approach Kandahar City from the west.	Summer 2008	The Taliban is increasingly able to project force into Kandahar City.
Summer 2005	Replacement of Governor Sherzai by Asadullah Khalid and the election of a Kandari Provincial Council effectively remove the Barakzai monopoly on Kandahar civil administration. Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, becomes the key powerbroker in Kandahar.	June 13, 2008	Taliban fighters assault Sarpoza Prison, releasing prisoners.
2006	The Taliban expand their presence in Zhari and Panjwai.	June 15, 2008	The Taliban conduct a second attack on Arghandab, surging fighters into the district and taking control of the northern bank before being repelled by ANSF and ISAF forces.
February 2006	Roughly 2,000 troops from the Canadian Task Force Orion deploy to Kandahar Province in February 2006.	Fall 2008-Mid-2009	The Taliban seek to forcefully undermine local government institutions in Kandahar city through intimidation, assassinations, and attacks on government forces and facilities.
July 1, 2006	Canadian ISAF forces officially assume responsibility for Kandahar from the United States.	February 2009	U.S. announces additional forces will be sent to Regional Command South. Canadian forces consolidate near Kandahar City and its southern approaches in Dand district.
September 2, 2006	ISAF forces launch Operation Medusa to clear Taliban fighters in Zhari. Taliban forces suffer heavy losses during the operation.	June 15, 2009	General Stanley McChrystal assumes command of ISAF, replacing General David McKiernan.
2007	Canadian and ANA forces conduct clearing operations, presence patrols, and establish multiple bases in Panjwayi and Zhari, supplemented by ANP.	Summer-Fall 2009	Canadian forces begin establishing a permanent presence in multiple villages south and southwest of Kandahar City.
	The Taliban conduct an IED campaign against ISAF and Afghan forces in Zhari and Panjwai, while simultaneously consolidating control over the local populace and developing a shadow structure of governance.	August 2009	Additional U.S. brigade, the 5th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, deploys to Kandahar.
		Fall 2009	U.S. and Afghan forces battle for control of Arghandab district.

of the deploying force was assigned to the critical populated areas surrounding Kandahar City. By the fall of 2009, the level of enemy entrenchment around Kandahar City was such that the units assigned to the area were inadequate for their tasks.

The Canadian battalion that was assigned responsibility for the populated areas surrounding Kandahar City was stretched too thin no later than the fall of 2008, when the Taliban's increased penetration of Kandahar City became evident. The Canadians' attempts to assert control over Zhari and Panjwai in 2007 and 2008 had not only stalled, but had also diverted Task Force Kandahar from disrupting the Taliban's takeover of Arghandab and projection into Kandahar City. In the face of this growing enemy threat, the small Canadian force transitioned in 2008 from holding terrain and protecting the population in Taliban-controlled areas, to operations designed to disrupt the Taliban by targeting IED cells and their logistics through raids.⁶²³ The closure of a number of posts in Zhari and Panjwai and the deployment of a U.S. battalion to Kandahar extended the scope of ISAF operations outside of the vicinity of Zhari and Panjwai into the Maiwand, Arghandab, and Shah Wali Kot districts. But operations targeting IED cells did little to the counter Taliban's control over the population, and as long as Taliban control persisted, ISAF operations had only marginal effects on the capabilities of the Taliban fighters.⁶²⁴

Task Force Kandahar began to reduce the number of Canadian bases in Zhari and Panjwai in May 2008, when the joint Canadian-ANP base at Singesar, ambitiously placed in the center of the Taliban-controlled area of Zhari, was closed down, only six months after its construction.⁶²⁵ The Canadians also began to reduce the amount of territory held in Panjwai in the fall of 2008, when they dismantled the combat outposts jointly held with the ANP at Talukan and Zangabad.⁶²⁶ They completed their withdrawal from the Panjwai Peninsula and dismantled the Forward Operating Base at Mushan in April 2009.⁶²⁷ With the closing of FOB Mushan, the Canadians essentially ceded the Panjwai peninsula to the Taliban, but given the paucity of Canadian troops, the move was prob-

ably a necessary response to the development of Taliban strongholds closer to Kandahar City.

Canadian operations targeting IED cells from the summer of 2008 to the spring of 2009 were primarily raids and searches conducted by one or two companies that usually lasted no longer than a week.⁶²⁸ A large number of these operations occurred in the western sub-districts of Zhari and Panjwai or in the Pashmul area of Zhari, which remained a Taliban stronghold two years after it was cleared by Operation Medusa.⁶²⁹ ISAF's need repeatedly to target areas like Pashmul demonstrated the limited effects of its operations and the Taliban's ability to regenerate bases in strategic areas in the absence of a long-term coalition presence.⁶³⁰ ISAF also conducted operations closer to Kandahar City in July 2008, particularly in Daman and Dand districts. Forces likewise entered the suburbs of Kandahar City to target an IED cell in Police District 6.⁶³¹ Another raid closer to Kandahar City targeted the critical Taliban bases in the vicinity of Nakhonay in October 2008.⁶³² Large cache finds in these areas revealed the scope of the Taliban's infiltration south of Kandahar. The coalition, however, continued to focus on Zhari and western Panjwai rather than on the newer Taliban bases in Arghandab, Senjaray, and the Kandahar City suburbs that were vital for the Taliban's infiltration into Kandahar City, allowing Taliban presence in Eastern Panjwai to persist until the summer of 2009.⁶³³

When ISAF deployed increased resources to Kandahar province during 2008, they took up position in Maiwand, presumably as a supporting effort for ISAF operations in Helmand. In the summer of 2008, ISAF redirected a battalion of the 3rd Brigade Combat team, 1st Infantry Division, to RC South to conduct counterinsurgency operations.⁶³⁴ Stationing an American battalion in Maiwand was also an attempt to disrupt Taliban supplies and lines of communication between the key cities of Kandahar and Helmand. Operations to win support from the population in Maiwand were complicated by the fact that the area was dominated by the Noorzai tribe, which was generally sympathetic to the Taliban and distrustful of the government.⁶³⁵ Details from ISAF operations

in Maiwand suggest that Taliban cells in the district were predominantly tied to the enemy system in Helmand, rather than in Kandahar.⁶³⁶ ISAF's commitment of an entire battalion to the Maiwand district diverted limited troops away from strategically critical areas of Arghandab and Kandahar City, where ISAF was not present to counter the Taliban's campaign.

The deployment of an additional U.S. battalion and the arrival of Canadian helicopters in December 2008 did allow ISAF to conduct several mutually supporting battalion-level operations in multiple districts within the province. In November, as part of a campaign designed to deny the Taliban their winter rest and reconfiguration period, ISAF conducted simultaneous operations in Panjwai, Zhari, and Maiwand.⁶³⁷ An airborne insertion of British Royal Marines in Zhari was the focal point of these maneuvers, while the operations in Maiwand and Panjwai were designed to cut off Taliban retreats.⁶³⁸

ISAF launched another offensive, Operation Jaley, from March 17-20, 2009, with over two battalions of Canadian, American, and British forces. The offensive involved simultaneous ISAF operations in Maiwand, Zhari, Arghandab, and Shah Wali Kot.⁶³⁹ The central effort of the offensive was a three pronged assault into Zhari to pin down insurgents and target IED cells.⁶⁴⁰ In Arghandab and lower Shah Wali Kot, the operation involved searches by the ANP, who were supported by Canadian police mentor teams, known as POMLETS.⁶⁴¹ These operations, however, were short in duration and continued to skirt around the most populated areas surrounding Kandahar City, doing little to affect the enemy's hold over areas like Arghandab and other suburbs. The operations yielded only modest finds of Taliban bomb-making material—about 1,000 pounds of explosive materials, a fraction of massive finds made in November 2009—and led to the detention of between one and two dozen insurgents.⁶⁴² These modest results caused no notable decrease

in the capabilities of Taliban cells, and IED attacks on ISAF only increased.⁶⁴³

ISAF operations in late 2008 and early 2009 did not have lasting effects on the enemy system in Kandahar. Given the short duration of ISAF operations, Taliban fighters could easily move to safe havens several kilometers from where ISAF operated and return to their original location on the same day that the operation concluded. ISAF's failure to protect the population in these areas left local villagers under the control of Taliban intimidation and governance. Unable to establish a sufficient presence to separate the local population from Taliban intimidation, ISAF suffered from limited intelligence about insurgent activities. In addition, ISAF's focus on Zhari, Panjwai, and Maiwand during this period targeted areas of secondary importance to the enemy campaign of taking Kandahar City. Arghandab, Senjaray, and

the northern, western, and southern suburbs of Kandahar City were left mostly undisturbed by ISAF until the summer of 2009.

In February 2009, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that it would deploy two additional brigades to Regional Command South. One of these

brigades would be deployed to Helmand and the other, a Stryker brigade, would deploy to Kandahar and Zabul in July and August 2009.⁶⁴⁴ The new forces allowed ISAF to achieve higher force densities, although ISAF's allocation of troops still failed to account for the Taliban's objectives in Kandahar. In response to the pending deployment, the overstretched Canadians began to concentrate on a smaller geographical area around Kandahar City in the spring of 2009.⁶⁴⁵ Having pulled out of Panjwai, the Canadian battle group announced in April 2009 its plans to secure a small number of villages in the Dand district, on the southern edge of Kandahar City, where support for the government was stronger, and then to concentrate development aid on these villages.⁶⁴⁶

*ISAF operations in late 2008
and early 2009 did not have
lasting effects on the enemy
system in Kandahar.*

The Canadian military identified Deh-e Bagh, in the Dand district, as a key point on Taliban lines of communication that allowed enemy forces to infiltrate Kandahar City, roughly five kilometers to the north.⁶⁴⁷ As discussed above, the terrain in Dand, defined by small villages, farms, irrigation channels, orchards, and vineyards, is, like Arghandab, an ideal insurgent base for attacks into the city.⁶⁴⁸ The mujahideen had used the Malajat area of Dand district as a major base during their war against the Soviets.⁶⁴⁹

From 2008 to 2009, the Taliban waged a long battle with ANSF for influence and control in Dand District.⁶⁵⁰ The Taliban, however, faced several obstacles in their battle for influence. The local population in Dand district was less sympathetic to the Taliban than the population in neighboring Panjwai district.⁶⁵¹ Dand is mostly populated by the Barakzai and Popolzai tribes, which had links to Kandahar's government, and while many Taliban commanders came from Zhari and Panjwai, Dand district, in contrast, is home to the Karzai family.⁶⁵² The district had also benefited from more development assistance since 2001 than had Panjwai or Zhari.⁶⁵³ All of these factors gave groups in Dand incentives to support the government. Even areas of Dand that faced Taliban intimidation signaled their support for ISAF activities.⁶⁵⁴ In early 2009, for example, tribal elders in the village of Salawat, located in a Barakzai and Popolzai enclave in Panjwai near the Dand District border,⁶⁵⁵ requested a visit from ISAF troops despite the Taliban presence around the village.⁶⁵⁶

The Afghan police were stronger in Dand than elsewhere in the province, despite being composed of several ANP units suffering from a confused chain of command and unclear loyalties.⁶⁵⁷ In mid-2008, district police chief Fida Mohammed reported that there were approximately 600 ANP in Dand who reported directly to Governor Khalid, while Mohammed himself commanded a force of some sixty ANP.⁶⁵⁸ Over the summer and fall of 2008, ISAF conducted an eight-week Focus District Development program—a U.S. measure designed to train and upgrade the capabilities of ANP units—with the Dand police force.⁶⁵⁹

The police forces in Dand checked Taliban infiltration, as the Taliban and the local police fought a running battle through 2008 and 2009.⁶⁶⁰ The Taliban targeted the local ANP with IED attacks and launched assaults against ANP posts.⁶⁶¹ Taliban assaults had mixed success.⁶⁶² Though the ANP took casualties in the Taliban attacks, they showed an ability proactively to target Taliban infiltrators in Dand District, and retaliated by conducting numerous raids of Taliban safe houses throughout the district.⁶⁶³ But limited control over Dand did not stop Taliban movement through the district, and there are reports that local authorities tolerated Taliban fighters traveling through the district as long as the insurgents were not believed to be planning attacks in Dand district itself.⁶⁶⁴

The Canadian decision to concentrate their forces in Dand in the summer of 2009 shored up the defenses of a strategically important area. But Dand was already under government control and the police force there had demonstrated the capability to repel Taliban attacks.⁶⁶⁵ The Canadian decision to focus on a fairly secure district rather than targeting the strategically important areas under Taliban control may have been an inefficient use of resources given the seriousness of the security situation in the province. The conceptual relationship between security and development guiding the Canadian deployment to Dand district is also unclear. In May 2009, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Defense Minister Stephen Mackay visited Kandahar, where he suggested that the Canadian deployment would refocus on development projects. Harper announced that Canada was “moving to a mission with more defined civilian objectives.”⁶⁶⁶ An emphasis on development, which did not take into account the realities on the ground in Kandahar Province, may have heavily impacted the decision to move into Dand, where a better security situation facilitated development work.

The prioritization of the development work was demonstrated by the emphasis the Canadians put on developing a “model village,” in Deh-e Bagh, a town of about 900 people and the administrative center for Dand.⁶⁶⁷ Supported by a commitment

to security and the establishment of security post, Canadian development aid in Deh-e Bagh did have positive effects on shoring up support for the government in the district.⁶⁶⁸ The Canadians funneled aid directly to the village, rather than working through the Kandahar Provincial Council, and in May and June 2009, they concentrated on a number of public works projects, such as irrigation repairs, public lighting projects, and the renovation of mosques.⁶⁶⁹ Canadian funding of the Deh-e Bagh model village was channeled through Ahamadullah Nazak, the Dand district chief, and his brother, who ensured that the funds were used to hire members of the local Barakzai tribe.⁶⁷⁰ The influx of funds and contracts for Barakzai tribesmen in the Dand district galvanized Barakzai leaders to embrace the project. Barakzai tribesmen organized security patrols and sent the local Taliban commander a letter barring him and his fighters from their town.⁶⁷¹ The Deh-e Bagh project also involved the deployment of ANSF units with Canadian mentors to outposts around the town.⁶⁷² The Taliban responded to the Deh-e Bagh project with a two day assault on the town in July, 2009, which was successfully repelled by the ANP and its Canadian mentors.⁶⁷³ Development reinforced counterinsurgency efforts in Dand, but only because the Canadian and Afghan forces were able to effectively secure the district with a high density of force.

During the summer and fall of 2009, the Canadians began to move outward from Deh-e Bagh and conduct operations to reassert control over eastern Panjwai that were more central to Kandahar's deteriorating security situation. The Canadians conducted operations around the Taliban stronghold of Nakhonay and Belanday, eight miles away from Deh-e Bagh, during June and July 2009. A series of operations named Constrictor I-IV disrupted Taliban IED and logistics cells operating in these areas, and led to the destruction of multiple Taliban IED factories and logistics hubs.⁶⁷⁴ The Canadians followed these operations by establishing a permanent security presence in the area, setting up two combat outposts in Zalakhan and Balanday, towns about three miles northwest of Nakhonay, at the beginning of August 2009.⁶⁷⁵ At the end of that month, the Canadians announced

Operation Kalay II, which aimed to build on the success of the Deh-e Bagh project and work to stabilize larger areas of Dand.⁶⁷⁶

In September 2009, the Canadians expanded outwards from Belanday and Zalakhan and moved into the villages of Salavat and Salakhan.⁶⁷⁷ These villages were located on the route from Panjwai into Kandahar City, and were populated mostly by Barakzai, Popolzai, and Alokozai tribesmen who were likely unsympathetic to the Taliban.⁶⁷⁸ Once the Canadians established a permanent presence and a critical troop density in the area, they experienced a significant increase in intelligence, as villagers began to view themselves as protected from Taliban intimidation.⁶⁷⁹ Canadian forces have since begun to develop dossiers on the local population and compile a census for these villages.⁶⁸⁰

To allow their forces to concentrate in Dand and Panjwai districts, the Canadians handed off responsibility for Zhari in August and September 2009 to elements of the 1-12 Infantry, a battalion of the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, which had been stationed in Maiwand, which in turn was replaced by 2-1 Stryker Infantry Regiment in September.⁶⁸¹

Although the Canadian battalion employed counterinsurgency doctrine to protect the population in Dand and parts of Panjwai, ISAF's limited troop strength led it to continue to rely on short operations to target IED cells in Zhari during the summer and fall of 2009. In the strategically important town of Senjaray, the Canadians made only a cursory attempt to contest Taliban influence, conducting a four-day operation at the end of May 2009.⁶⁸² The Canadian operation came at the request of local elders in Senjaray.⁶⁸³ Canadian forces, however, did not actually enter the town, instead patrolling a small strip of farmland to its south and leaving a seventy-five man ANP unit to comb Senjaray.⁶⁸⁴ The operation was insufficient to disrupt Taliban activity in the area. ISAF and ANSF forces conducted further sweeps through Senjaray in August, uncovering munitions caches and detaining insurgents.⁶⁸⁵ From June to September 2009, joint U.S., Canadian,

and British forces conducted several more battalion-sized operations in Zhari District targeting IED cells operating against Highway One.⁶⁸⁶

The success of the Canadian battalion in Dand District and Eastern Panjwai demonstrates that properly applied and resourced counterinsurgency tactics can succeed in the areas surrounding Kandahar City. But if Kandahar City is to be secured, it is equally important that counter-insurgency is applied in areas critical to enemy operations in Kandahar. Yet, counterinsurgency operations in Dand district will not have systemic effects unless there are mutually reinforcing operations carried out in the southern suburbs of Kandahar City which abut Dand.

The Strykers Arrive

At the beginning of August 2009, a U.S. Stryker brigade, the 5th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, deployed to southern Afghanistan.⁶⁸⁷ The brigade's disposition had been planned while General David McKiernan was still commander of ISAF.⁶⁸⁸ Of the four battalions of the incoming Stryker brigade, the 4-23 Stryker Infantry Regiment was assigned to Zabul province, the 8-1 Stryker Cavalry Battalion was assigned to Spin Boldak district, and the 1-17 Stryker Infantry Regiment was assigned to Arghandab and Shah Wali Kot.⁶⁸⁹ The 2-1 Stryker conducted operations across the province, including a ten-day clearing mission with 1-17 in Arghandab in September 2009, before moving into Maiwand later that month.⁶⁹⁰ The assignment of 2-1 to Maiwand allowed elements of the U.S. infantry battalion previously deployed in Maiwand to move to Zhari in September 2009.⁶⁹¹

By October 2009, ISAF presence in Kandahar consisted of a Canadian battalion in Dand and Panjwai, a U.S. battalion under Canadian command in Maiwand and Zhari, a U.S. Stryker battalion in Arghandab and Shah Wali Kot districts,

a Stryker battalion in Spin Boldak, and a final Stryker battalion in Maiwand.⁶⁹² In addition, Canadian OMLTS and American Embedded Training Teams were embedded with ANA units operating in Kandahar City and were reinforced by the deployment of a U.S. Military Police battalion to support ANSF units in Kandahar.⁶⁹³

The areas of responsibility for the newly-arrived Stryker brigade generated some controversy between ISAF and RC South Headquarters.⁶⁹⁴ RC South Headquarters was cautious about deploying units in Kandahar City and its populous suburbs, arguing that doing so might pull Taliban fighters out of rural areas and into Kandahar City and its surrounding areas.⁶⁹⁵ Yet, these arguments do not make sense in light of the Taliban's campaign plan for Kandahar City, which emphasized control

of Kandahar City and its surrounding areas. Nor do they account for the fact that the Taliban had already achieved a significant presence in the suburbs of Kandahar. Nevertheless, ISAF assigned three-quarters of the Stryker brigade to areas of secondary significance to the enemy—Zabul, Spin Boldak, and Maiwand. ISAF stationed only one battalion in Arghandab,

and one battalion-sized training-force in Kandahar City, the key terrain for the enemy.

Spin Boldak is important terrain because it offers a direct route from QST safehavens in the Balochistan Province of Pakistan to the populated areas around Kandahar City, achieving an acceptable level of security in the district does not at present require the deployment of a U.S. Stryker battalion. Though the Taliban have targeted the town of Spin Boldak from safehaven in the town of Chaman across the Pakistani border,⁶⁹⁶ Achakzai tribal militias and the Afghan National Border Police, both commanded by the capable young commander Abdul Razziq, have resisted Taliban encroachment into their district with assistance of small Special Forces and police training

If Kandahar City is to be secured, it is equally important that counterinsurgency is applied in areas critical to enemy operations in Kandahar.

teams.⁶⁹⁷ The Stryker battalion deployed to Spin Boldak has primarily conducted patrols in areas with little to no enemy contact and conducted development assistance.⁶⁹⁸

The Battle to Retake Arghandab

The main security development in Kandahar from August to November 2009 has been the battle for control of Arghandab District. The Taliban reinforced and entrenched its position in Arghandab in the months leading up to the assignment of the I-17 Stryker Regiment to the district.⁶⁹⁹ In the spring of 2009, the Taliban sent a unit of foreign fighters to the district to train local IED cells. In the beginning of August, the Taliban moved additional units to Arghandab to reinforce their presence there.⁷⁰⁰ The Taliban's movement of additional resources and fighters into Arghandab and its subsequent tenacity in holding the district demonstrates that maintaining control of Arghandab is critical for the Taliban's campaign plan in Kandahar.⁷⁰¹ Once deployed, U.S. troops established several platoon-sized bases in Arghandab, including a base in the village of Jelawar, which sits north of the tarmac road running on the north bank of the Arghandab River to Shah Wali Kot District.⁷⁰² The I-17 Stryker Infantry Regiment was supported by a small number of ANA troops and their Canadian mentors.⁷⁰³ U.S. troops conducted regular foot patrols and mounted patrols through parts of the district.⁷⁰⁴ ISAF patrols were particularly common in the area of north-central Arghandab surrounding Jelawar and Chaharqulba.⁷⁰⁵ There is a lack of reporting about ISAF ground presence in the southern parts of the district, around the heavily populated areas of Adirah, Ta'bine 'Ulya, Marza, Kohak, and Sayedan. It is therefore unclear from the open source whether ISAF has established a regular presence in these areas, or whether it has concentrated forces only on the less populated northern areas of the district.

The depth of the Taliban's entrenchment in the district became evident in September and October of 2009.⁷⁰⁶ Taliban IED cells aggressively targeted ISAF units in Arghandab, severely limiting the mobility of U.S. troops.⁷⁰⁷ IEDs were particular-

ily effective in Arghandab because of the canalized nature of the terrain, which is crisscrossed by irrigation channels, vineyards, and thick orchards. The use of IEDs has forced U.S. troops off main roads, where movement through orchards and vineyards and marshes is quite difficult.⁷⁰⁸ In addition, the Taliban often conducted ambushes on ISAF patrols immediately after IED attacks, on occasion engaging ISAF troop for over an hour.⁷⁰⁹ U.S. troops in Arghandab faced the same obstacles that hindered Canadian troops in Zhari and Panjwai in 2007 and 2008, though the terrain in Arghandab is even more wooded and densely-cultivated than it is in Zhari and Panjwai.⁷¹⁰ U.S. forces had some success in targeting IED cells, but not enough to disrupt the insurgents' operations significantly.⁷¹¹ A late October raid killed nine Taliban, including a local commander in the Khalishak area, two miles north of Jejewur, including local Taliban commander Afghanmal.⁷¹² Much of the successful targeting of Taliban cells has relied on airstrikes, several of which have been alleged by locals to have killed civilians.⁷¹³

By the end of October 2009, I-17 Stryker Regiment had lost twenty soldiers, killed in action, in the space of three months. The regiment has not removed the Taliban's presence in Arghandab.⁷¹⁴ In October 2009, Alokozai tribal leader and Wali Karzai ally, Agha Lalai, reported that "during the day, 30 to 40 percent of [Arghandab District] is under control of the Taliban, but at night, 80 percent of the district is under their control ... The Taliban are patrolling and walking freely."⁷¹⁵

The regiment's experience in Arghandab has demonstrated that a battalion-sized unit is insufficient to reverse the Taliban's entrenched control over the strategically critical Arghandab District in the time available. The Canadian experience in neighboring Dand district over the summer and fall of 2009 demonstrated, sufficient troop densities are vital to winning the trust of the local population. Properly resourcing counterinsurgency is particularly important in Arghandab, where the Alokozai were originally supportive of the Afghan government until the tribe's leadership came under intense and violent Taliban intimidation.

CONCLUSION

Since 2004, the Quetta Shura Taliban has waged a campaign with a clear and constant objective: to exert control over Kandahar City. To accomplish this objective, the Taliban sought to take control of the populated areas surrounding Kandahar City. In 2006, the Taliban contested the districts of Zhari and Panjwai, but ISAF prevented the Taliban from using these areas as a base for attacks on Kandahar City. To overcome this obstacle, the Taliban conducted a successful campaign to take the Arghandab district in 2007 and 2008. In addition, the Taliban has built a significant presence in Kandahar's northern, western, and southern suburbs. The Taliban thereby gained access to areas that it can use as bases for attacks on Kandahar. The Taliban gained control of the areas surrounding Kandahar City by using targeted violence to intimidate local leaders, supplemented with an intimidation campaign and the implementation of a judicial system to increase the Taliban's legitimacy.

ISAF failed to block the Taliban's advance because it did not understand the enemy's objectives in Kandahar. ISAF's Regional Command South Headquarters has prioritized the fight in Helmand and severely under-resourced Kandahar province, despite the Quetta Shura Taliban's focus on Kandahar. ISAF units in Kandahar have also been operating in the least important areas, given the enemy's objectives. In the critical period of 2007-2008, the battalion-sized Canadian presence was tied down by an under-resourced campaign in Zhari and Panjwai, and was unable to respond to the Taliban's campaign to take Arghandab and Kandahar City's suburbs. With the exception of a battalion now fighting in Arghandab, the Stryker Brigade that deployed to Kandahar in 2009 has also been largely positioned in areas where it makes only a marginal contribution to the security of Kandahar City – at least at November 2009 force-levels.

ISAF's task in Kandahar must be to reverse the Taliban's momentum, eliminate its sanctuaries around Kandahar city, and neutralize its capabilities to attack Kandahar. Removing the Tali-

ban sanctuaries in turn necessitates a properly resourced counterinsurgency campaign that is supported by simultaneous and mutually supporting operations throughout Kandahar Province. The current distribution of ISAF units in Kandahar must be adjusted to achieve the force densities needed to neutralize or defeat the Taliban. Arghandab and the suburbs of Kandahar City must be prioritized over areas of secondary strategic significance. Insufficiently resourcing the fight in Arghandab and the suburbs of Kandahar risks the same sort of failure that ISAF experienced during its campaign in Zhari and Panjwai in 2007 and 2008.

ISAF has been constantly disrupting the Taliban in Kandahar. This approach is flawed, as simply disrupting the Taliban is insufficient for success. Constant disruption cannot get ISAF closer to an endstate of the prolonged, if not permanent, reduction of Taliban violence and intimidation necessary to prevent the insurgency from having a strategic, delegitimizing effect on the government of Afghanistan. At a minimum, ISAF must neutralize the Taliban (that is, to render their personnel or material incapable of interfering with ISAF and ANSF operations),⁷¹⁶ and perhaps destroy it, even if it cannot defeat it. To destroy an enemy is "to physically render an enemy force combat-ineffective unless it is reconstituted;" whereas to defeat an enemy is "to either disrupt or nullify the enemy force commander's plan and subdue his will to fight so that he is unwilling or unable to further pursue his adopted course of action and yields to the will of his opponent."⁷¹⁷

Defeating the Taliban—or at least destroying it—requires more Coalition and Afghan forces in Kandahar Province. If ISAF does not generate sufficient force densities in critical areas, its attempted counteroffensive will culminate, giving enemy fighters a permissive environment and allowing Taliban terror to continue in Kandahar City. Without sufficient resources, local leaders will continue to fear the Taliban and see the insurgency as ascendant in Kandahar. ISAF cannot simply protract the conflict to hand responsibilities to the ANSF. The population may eventually decide that a Taliban victory is preferable to a

drawn out conflict in which ISAF buys time, but demonstrates no intention to win.

Victory in Kandahar will not be achieved overnight, but it is possible. More forces can help secure Arghandab, sections of Kandahar City, Dand, and eastern Panjwai, creating the conditions for ISAF forces to expand security into other areas with pro-government populations, including Khakrez, Ghorak, and parts of Zhari and Shah Wali Kot. Destroying the Taliban in these areas will isolate their remaining pockets of support and weaken the insurgency as a military force. If the Taliban are no longer perceived as able to provide security, there is a possibility that the major Ghilzai and Noorzai constituencies in western Panjwai, Zhari, Maiwand, and eastern Shah Wali Kot and western Zabul could be politically reconciled with the government.

The Taliban have staked their campaign to retake the south on seizing Kandahar City. Destroying the insurgents in Kandahar is a critical and necessary first step for reversing the Taliban's gains across southern Afghanistan and neutralizing their effects on the entire country.

NOTES

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- ⁴ Adamec, ed., *Kandahar and South-Central Afghanistan*, 439-454.
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