

SEPTEMBER 2009

JEFFREY A. DRESSLER

AFGHANISTAN REPORT 2

SECURING HELMAND

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO THE ENEMY



INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY of WAR

MILITARY ANALYSIS AND EDUCATION
FOR CIVILIAN LEADERS

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Front Cover Photograph: United States Marines patrol Now Zad in Helmand Province using a minesweeper to check for buried IEDs. (Photo taken by Michael Phillips on May 5, 2009)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Helmand Province is critical terrain for both the enemy and coalition forces.
 - Helmand contains important lines of communication for both enemy and friendly forces.
 - It is an agricultural hub for Afghanistan and economic nexus for the narcotics trade.
 - The overwhelmingly-Pashtun population of Helmand shares ethnic and cultural ties to other areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.
 - Recent gains enjoyed by insurgents in Helmand have made a deliberate and properly-re-sourced campaign by coalition forces that much more critical.
 - The enemy system in Helmand is resourced and directed by the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST). The enemy is determined, well-organized, and entrenched in the province. In recent years, the enemy has shown its ability to adapt to the evolving conflict by developing and executing coherent campaign plans.
 - The enemy system in Helmand Province can be divided into three distinct but related areas in the southern, central, and northern Helmand River Valley.
 - The southern Helmand River Valley facilitates the movement of foreign fighters and weapons to central Helmand. It also facilitates the refining, storage and eventual movement of narcotics out of Helmand, mainly through the province's southern border with Pakistan.
 - Central Helmand is the enemy's center of gravity in the province. The heart of the enemy system is located west of the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah and around the province's economic center of Gereshk in the Nahri Sarraj district.
 - The enemy system in northern Helmand is entrenched along the Helmand and Musa Qala Rivers, in and around the fertile farmland mainly used for opium cultivation.
- Success in Helmand requires a comprehensive population-centric counterinsurgency campaign that is properly resourced and executed. Such a campaign seeks to maximize the net effect of limited resources in critical areas by protecting and positively influencing the population. Coalition forces cannot be everywhere and prioritizing objectives is essential.
- Given limited resources, coalition efforts must focus on the critical population centers. For the enemy and indeed, the coalition, the most critical population centers in the province are Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, Nad Ali, Nawa, Garmser, Sangin, Musa Qala, and Kajaki.
- Unity of effort is vital and operations must be mutually-reinforcing in order to achieve maximum impact. Coalition forces must work together to execute a properly coordinated counterinsurgency campaign or their efforts will fail to achieve decisive effects.
 - Over the past several years, coalition forces have engaged the insurgency through targeted raids, designed to push insurgents out of a given area. The result has been operations that temporarily clear an area but fail to prevent the return of insurgents.

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- The role and responsibilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) must be clearly articulated. There has been an overreliance on the Afghan National Police (ANP) in Helmand. The ANP are simply not equipped for the combat-intensive initial phases of counterinsurgency. The appropriate role for the ANP should be maintaining order once the insurgency has been reduced to a manageable level and effective rule of law has been established.
- The Afghan National Army (ANA) is appropriate for the combat-intensive phases of counterinsurgency, though ANA soldiers are not present in sufficient numbers in Helmand. Growing the size of the ANA and advancing its capacity to carry out mission-critical counterinsurgency operations in Helmand will help to relieve some of the burden that is currently shouldered by coalition forces.

SECURING HELMAND

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO THE ENEMY

By Jeffrey A. Dressler

INTRODUCTION

Southern Afghanistan is ground-zero for the Taliban insurgency, and this is especially evident in Helmand province. Helmand is notorious, if not for the flourishing narcotics trade, then for the Taliban insurgency that dominates large swaths of territory. The coalition's lack of sufficient resources and a clear strategy has resulted in an overstretched force incapable of maintaining the initiative against a determined, organized and well entrenched enemy.

Although the situation in Helmand is serious, a coherent, sufficiently-resourced strategy that focuses on the proven principles of counterinsurgency can reverse the course of the war in one of Afghanistan's most menacing provinces. Indeed, the hard-fought security gains in the province over the 2009 summer months have helped to establish the necessary preconditions for efforts going forward. Yet, a discussion of the way forward in Helmand necessitates a clearer understanding of the enemy, the terrain, and past failures of coalition efforts.

This report examines the recent history of enemy and coalition efforts in Helmand. The first section details the enemy's senior leadership and their command and control structure. The second section provides a thorough description of the enemy system within Helmand. The third section discusses the British experience in Helmand, and includes a detailed analysis of the summer 2009 operations conducted by British forces and U.S. Marines in central and southern Helmand. Lastly, the paper concludes with a discussion of the way forward.

OVERVIEW: HELMAND PROVINCE

Helmand is Afghanistan's largest province. Spanning over 60,000 square kilometers, it is roughly the size of the West Virginia. Helmand is located in southern Afghanistan and borders the provinces of Nimruz and Farah to the west, Kandahar to the east, Pakistan's Baluchistan to the south. To

the north, Helmand is bordered by Uruzgan, Day Kundi, and Ghor provinces. Helmand also contains the longest river in the country, the Helmand River, which flows for more than 1,000 kilometers from Wardak province through Bamyan and Day Kundi through Helmand and into Nimruz. The fertile area and agricultural fields surrounding the Helmand River are the heart of Helmand's agricultural sector and account for more than half of Afghanistan's poppy cultivation.

In the 1980s, Helmand was the main battleground between the Akhundzadeh clan, which dominated the majority of the district and controlled the poppy trade, and Mullah Abdul Wahid (or Rais-e Baghran), a strongman from Baghran district in northern Helmand. After the Taliban captured Kandahar in late 1994, Rais-e Baghran met with its leader, Mullah Omar, and a delegation of Taliban in Helmand's capital Lashkar Gah to discuss a strategic alliance.¹ They made a deal granting the Taliban control of Helmand and the accompanying narcotics trade in exchange for their help removing the Akhundzadeh clan from power. The clan resisted the Taliban encroachment until mid-January of 1995, when they were finally driven out of Helmand into Ghor. The result was unrivaled Taliban dominance in the province.

Yet, the conquest of Helmand was about far more than simple territorial expansion of Taliban rule westward from Kandahar. Helmand also represented the largest concentration of Pashtuns in Afghanistan.² Helmand province also offered a



PHOTO 1 | HELMAND RIVER VIEW FROM ABOVE (PHOTO BY MICHAEL YON)

“great economic incentive for the Taliban. Helmand’s economic activities were based mainly on opium cultivations, and thousands of people were engaged in farming and trading.”³ For the Taliban, control of this economic hub provided them with an infusion of funds through the taxation of the trade. Helmand also afforded the Taliban with influence in Pakistan’s Baluchistan, the main destination for illicit Afghan goods. Quetta, Baluchistan is currently the safe haven for Mullah Omar and the Taliban’s senior leadership.

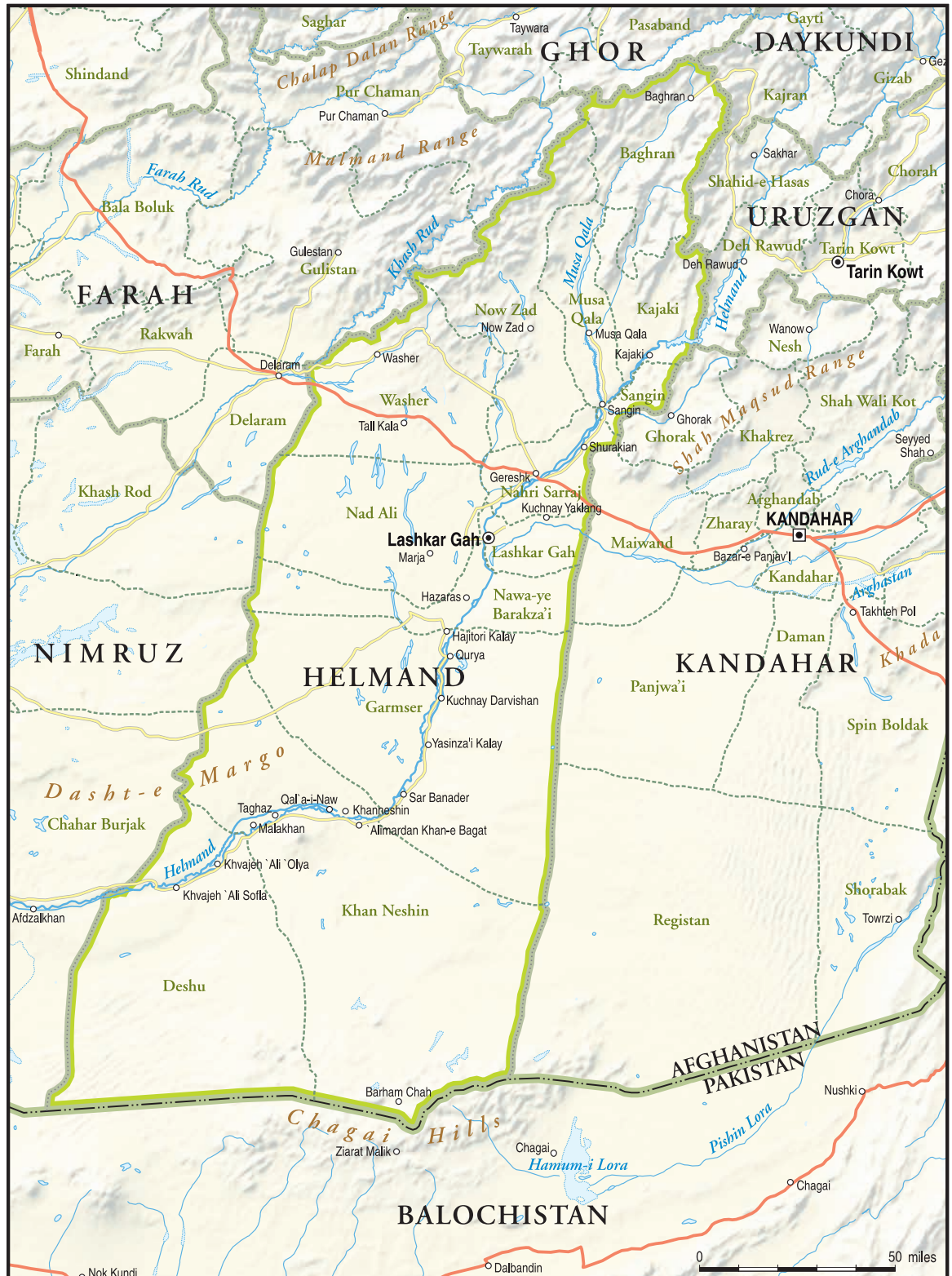
Throughout 1994 and 1995, the Taliban expanded to the west and east, effectively controlling the provinces of Nimruz and Farah in addition to the eastern provinces of Zabul, Ghazni and Logar. This move gave the Taliban control of Afghanistan’s only highway, which led directly into Kabul. The Rabbani government in Kabul was responsible for the political wing of the ruling Jamiat party, while Ahmed Shah Massoud, the leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, maintained his own, separate military-political wing.⁴ The Taliban’s move on Kabul was in part facilitated by their defeat of Ismail Khan in Herat, who was allied with the Rabbani government in Kabul and Massoud.⁵ In September 1996, after more than a year of brutal fighting, the Taliban seized Kabul and announced their administration as the official government of Afghanistan.⁶ During the following three years, the Taliban expanded their military and civil administration to control roughly eighty percent of the country.⁷

After the overthrow of the Taliban in late 2001, several Afghan opposition groups met under the

auspices of the United Nations in Bonn, Germany, to set the foundations for the new provisional government in Afghanistan. An Emergency Loya Jirga or “Grand Council”—a traditional Afghan decision-making body of prominent leaders from around the country—was held to establish an Afghan Transitional Authority and elect a Transitional Administration with Hamid Karzai as Interim President. The new President then appointed a commission to draft a new constitution, which was approved by a Constitutional Loya Jirga in January 2004. Hamid Karzai became the first President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan during nationwide elections held in October 2004.⁸

The Taliban’s popularity in Helmand grew from 2004 to 2006 in the general absence of effective state administration and the abuse of power by provincial officials, including the then-governor of Helmand, Sher Mohammed Akhundzadeh, and Dad Mohammed Khan, the National Directorate of Security chief for Helmand. These officials were appointed by President Hamid Karzai. As a result, they enjoyed the backing of the Afghan government and NATO-ISAF forces. Akhundzadeh nevertheless maintained a private militia and used strong-arm tactics to govern the province.⁹ The Akhundzadeh tribe’s return to power resulted in the marginalization and taxation of the pro-Taliban Ishaqzai tribe, which was especially influential in Helmand’s northern provinces.¹⁰

Similarly, Dad Mohammed Khan was also known for his abuses and was eventually removed from his position, only later to be elected to the provincial council.¹¹ The corruption and brutality of these key figures, compounded by the absence of state administration officials, tarnished the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Afghan government in the eyes of Helmand’s population. The inability to staff and resource administrative posts created an opening for the Taliban. They stepped in to fill the security and governance vacuum, installing elements of their shadow government to provide security and judicial oversight in many of Helmand’s districts.¹² Many tribal elders and other victims of the pro-Karzai strongmen turned to the Taliban for support.¹³ Additionally, the marginal-



MAP 1 | HELMAND PROVINCE

ization of Akhundzadeh during 2006 weakened his militia's ability to fight the Taliban, contributing to the deteriorating security situation in the province.¹⁴

Helmand in 2009 is a hub of Taliban operations in southern Afghanistan. The province is described as "a major gateway into southern Afghanistan for manpower, food, and ammunition from their bases in Pakistan and for the all-important flowering drug trade."¹⁵ Helmand's security situation had deteriorated long before the British took over responsibility for the province in early 2006. Since then, the British forces have been unable to neutralize or effectively disrupt the enemy, which operates with virtual impunity around the major population centers of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk and maintains freedom of movement in the southern and northern districts of the province.

HELMAND AND THE QUETTA SHURA TALIBAN

The enemy system in Helmand is resourced and directed by the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), a re-organized leadership structure based on the early 1990s Supreme Shura that served as the governing body of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan prior to 2001.¹⁶ The QST is headed by Mullah Mohammad Omar, who calls himself the *Amir-ul-Momineen* or Leader of the Faithful.¹⁷ The term 'Quetta Shura' originated from Mullah Omar's relocation of the Taliban organization to Quetta during the winter of 2002.¹⁸ Mullah Omar and his group continue to refer to themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, despite being removed from power in 2001. Currently, the QST's leadership structure is comprised of two main bodies, the *rahbari shura*, and the *majlis al-shura*.¹⁹ The *rahbari shura* (leadership council) was created by Omar in March of 2003, and is essentially an updated version of the Supreme Shura with an estimated ten to thirty-three members.²⁰ The *majlis al-shura* (consultative council) is a newer creation, formed between September and October of 2006 and comprised of thirteen members, most of whom are members of the *rahbari shura*, and a selection of "advisors."²¹ Responsible for the Taliban's opera-

tions in southern and much of western Afghanistan, the QST is the "intellectual and ideological underpinning of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan."²² The remainder of the QST senior leadership is filled-out by members of the two *shuras*.²³

The QST has established two new committees, both of which reflected its ability to adapt to the evolving conflict; the first deals with grievances from commanders and fighters while the second addresses complaints from Afghan villagers.²⁴ Addressing and resolving issues of the QST's commanders and fighters is meant to improve the solidarity and cohesion of the movement. Far more interesting is the QST's desire to provide restitution to local populations, a clear attempt to improve the organization's standing in the local communities by reigning-in rogue elements. In the past, villagers have complained of thievery, mistreatment and excessive brutality at the hands of the Taliban. Coinciding with the establishment of these committees, the QST released an updated "code of conduct" for fighters and commanders operating under their banner in Afghanistan.²⁵ The new code prohibits: disfigurement, forcible collection of "donations," kidnapping for ransom and the searching of homes without occupants' permission.²⁶ The new code of conduct, along with the establishment of two new committees demonstrates a distinct shift in the QST's *modus operandi*, clearly a conscious decision by QST senior leadership to win the support of the population.

Although Mullah Mohammad Omar remains the figurehead atop the QST organization, he is no longer directs day-to-day operations. His advanced age, relative lack of operational experience and "most wanted" status necessitated a change in leadership. His reputation and admiration among rank-and-file Taliban still make him the spiritual leader of the movement, both for cohesion and recruitment. The QST's day-to-day operations are handled by Omar's top deputy, Mullah Barader, who solidified his position after the arrest of top-aide Mullah Obaidullah in March 2007 and the death of Mullah Dadullah Lang in May 2007.²⁷ Omar and Barader have a close, long-standing

relationship. Both fought side-by-side against the Soviets and later established their own *madrassas* in Kandahar.²⁸

Prior to Barader's ascension, the Quetta Shura was supervised by Barader and Omar's top aid, an individual known as Mullah Obaidullah.²⁹ According to reports, Barader and Obaidullah were the only two aides that Mullah Omar communicated with at the time.³⁰ Therefore, it is plausible that Barader would have assumed the role of top aid to Omar sometime after the arrest of Obaidullah in March 2007 and death of Dadullah in May 2007.³¹ Just five months later in October 2007, the official publication of the QST, *Al-Samood* described Barader, the former governor of Herat in the Taliban's regime, as the deputy leader of the Taliban when he announced the QST's operational plans for the coming spring.³² Barader's commander for southern Afghanistan is believed to be Mullah Abdullah Zakir, the former Guantanamo Bay prisoner No. 008 who was transferred along with twelve others to the custody of the Afghan government in December 2007 and released shortly thereafter.³³ It is believed that Zakir is responsible for countering the summer 2009 Coalition forces build-up in Afghanistan's south.³⁴

The QST is organized functionally in Helmand province. The organization consists of indigenous fighting units, facilitators, and foreign fighters. QST commanders plan and lead offensive and defensive operations against coalition and Afghan forces, whereas facilitators manage logistical elements. However, there is evidence to suggest that more senior-level commanders are responsible for both.³⁵

QST commanders in Helmand operate within a hierarchical chain of command stretching back to Quetta. The Quetta leadership seems to give general guidance to the organization at the beginning of the spring fighting year and indeed, throughout the fighting season which until this past year,

typically ended in the fall. The operational orders typically appear in the form of a planned offensive, such as the past *Kamin* and *Ebrat* offensives.³⁶ The Quetta-based senior leaders also adjust the campaign as it unfolds if major changes in mission or resources are required. For example, senior leaders in Quetta have issued such requests for reinforcements when coalition and Afghan forces launch operations into critical enemy terrain.³⁷ This type of guidance allows the Quetta-based leadership to identify its priorities to Helmand-based leaders, who might need resolution at a higher command echelon.³⁸ Most importantly, some central leadership or senior provincial leadership allocates foreign fighters to the QST commanders throughout the province to conduct massed offensive and defensive operations against coalition and Afghan forces.³⁹

QST commanders in Helmand operate within a hierarchical chain of command stretching back to Quetta.

On March 16, 2009, a precision air strike near Now Zad killed prominent Helmand Taliban leaders Jamaluddin Hanifi and Maulawi Mohammed Saddiq, along with two of their associates.⁴⁰ According to ISAF reports, since early

2008, "[Hanifi] established himself as an integral member of the insurgency in Now Zad, and was heavily involved in several IED attacks, ambushes and the planning and execution of conventional attacks."⁴¹ Hanifi allegedly reported to Abdul Qayoum Zakir (A.K.A., Mullah Zakir) and Mullah Naim Barich, who command Afghan forces from Quetta, Pakistan.

Similarly, Maulawi Mohammed Saddiq was identified in late 2008 as a key insurgent facilitator in Helmand. According to NATO-ISAF, Saddiq was "involved in several illegal activities including the procurement of IEDs and other military hardware into central Helmand... also one of the main authors of the Taliban regulations for Helmand province."⁴² Saddiq allegedly reported to the senior Taliban commander Akhter Mohammed Mansur (a.k.a. Mullah Mansur). Mullah Mansur was the Minister of Civil Aviation and Transportation in the Taliban's regime and is considered to

be a senior commander of the QST operating in southern Afghanistan and reportedly a member of the rahbari shura.⁴³ Given that Hanifi and Saddiq were recently killed in Now Zad, it likely remains a significant command and control hub for the Taliban, despite the presence of approximately 300 Marines in the area.

Since the QST's leadership operates from outside of Afghanistan, and since the organization masses fighters only on occasions, mid- and senior-level commanders likely run the day-to-day insurgency in Helmand. Commanders are the most mobile elements of the QST, traveling throughout the province to organize and lead defensive and offensive operations.⁴⁴ Battlefield reports suggest that commanders are mobile rather than stationary and do not maintain "area ownership" in a strict sense.⁴⁵ Senior-level commanders are responsible for coordinating activity within their zone, which can be as small as a single district or as large as a major portion of the province, such as central or northern Helmand.⁴⁶ Senior- and mid-level commanders within Helmand communicate regularly to achieve that coordination, showing that the organization relies on a decentralized approach and lateral ties between commanders of neighboring zones to perform its operations.⁴⁷ On occasion, commanders have called on reinforcements from surrounding areas, shifting resources around the battlefield as needed.⁴⁸

The senior leadership in Quetta nevertheless provides direction, guidance, and sometimes issues direct orders to the senior commanders in Helmand.⁴⁹ Senior commanders physically travel to Quetta on occasion to meet with QST senior leadership. These visits are arranged to share "best practices" and "lessons learned" to improve operational effectiveness.⁵⁰ For example, Mullah Rahim, a senior commander in Helmand was arrested during a raid in Quetta during a brief stay in the summer of 2008.⁵¹ Mullah Azizullah, a senior commander in neighboring Uruzgan province, was arrested in early 2009, reportedly returning from a trip to Quetta.⁵² Communication between Quetta senior leadership and commanders in Afghanistan is not limited to face-to-face interaction, however. Raids on various compounds

throughout Helmand have netted scores of satellite telephones and two-way radios, suggesting that communication between commanders in and out of Helmand regularly occurs.⁵³

QST operations at the sub-district level are less clear, although these operations are most likely resourced by indigenous fighters.⁵⁴ It is likely that the QST's central command and control is weaker as operations and attacks are conducted at the village-level. Low-level commanders and small-unit leaders (no less than five personnel) likely operate with a higher degree of autonomy because of the nature of their operations.⁵⁵ Smaller units are typically comprised of between eight and twelve men, responsible for planting IEDs, conducting small-scale ambushes of coalition and Afghan patrols and checkpoints and collecting intelligence on locals' interaction with coalition and Afghan forces.⁵⁶ These units maintain a working knowledge of coalition and Afghan lines of operation in a specific piece of terrain, enabling them to launch attacks when the opportunity presents itself. Less ideologically-motivated indigenous fighters are recruited locally to fight under QST commanders.⁵⁷ According to some estimates, the average foot soldier is paid between \$100-150 a month, while cell commanders make considerably more, approximately \$350 a month.⁵⁸

Facilitators are responsible for receiving and directing foreign fighters, distributing weapons such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), explosives and chemicals, ammunition, and small-arms.⁵⁹ The QST's most-critical facilitation point is located in southern Helmand between Khan Neshin and Garmser. This area lies close to Barham Chah and other entry points along the Helmand-Pakistan border, and it has been largely undisturbed by Afghan and coalition forces. When the Marines launched an operation to retake Garmser in May 2008, the majority of the QST's operations in the district, including the main facilitation hub, shifted south to such villages as Koshtay and Lakari and north to areas above Garmser, such as Marjah and the Sangin River Valley.⁶⁰ The rest of the QST's facilitators are located in districts throughout the province, primarily responsible for managing IED manufacturing facilities.⁶¹

The most prolific networks have been discovered north of Highway One in villages and compounds between Gereshk and Kajaki.⁶²

A smaller number of facilitators have also been classified as financiers, according to coalition and Afghan reports.⁶³ Financiers are responsible for handling taxes collected from bazaar vendors, and local residents. They may also be responsible for storing and transporting narcotics.⁶⁴ For example, Haji Adam, killed in Maiwand, Kandahar in January of 2009, not only served as a prominent QST facilitator with strong links to senior QST leaders, but was also a wealthy opium smuggler.⁶⁵ Adam operated in the Taliban controlled territory along the northern Helmand-Kandahar border and used profits from the drug trade in Sangin to fund the insurgency.⁶⁶ The remainder of the Taliban's opium profits is generated as follows:⁶⁷

- Taliban charge opium farmers a ten percent Islamic tax (*ushr*) on opium at harvest
- Narcotics traders who buy opium from farmers must pay the Taliban a tax, as well as truckers who pay a per-kilogram transit tariff
- The Taliban are paid by narcotics traffickers for protecting processing labs that refine opium into heroin
- The Taliban in Quetta are paid regular installments from narcotics kingpins who effectively run the opium trade

However, the Taliban's revenue is not simply limited to the taxation of the drug trade. In addition to opium, the Taliban also charge the *ushr* on legal crops such as wheat.⁶⁸ In some districts in Helmand, the tax amounts to approximately one-tenth of farmer's total crop yield.⁶⁹ The Taliban have also been known to collect taxes at various roadway checkpoints throughout the province.⁷⁰ In addition to demanding money, Taliban fighters typically search vehicles for government employees or foreigners.⁷¹ Far more troubling and lucrative, is the Taliban's taxation of logistical convoys supplying coalition bases in and around Afghanistan's south. It has been widely reported that Afghan security contractors, trucking companies and



PHOTO 2 | RAW OPIUM CACHE FIND IN BABAJI. (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE PHOTO)

construction firms must pay significant taxes to the Taliban in exchange for carrying out their activities.⁷²

The third element of the QST enemy system in Helmand is foreign fighters. These fighters constitute a portion of the enemy's total force numbers. The majority of foreign fighters are recruited from Pakistan's madrassas, refugee camps in Baluchistan, and reportedly as far east as Miramshah in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA).⁷³ They generally cross the porous Helmand-Baluchistan border, making their way up the Helmand River. A Marine operation in Garmser during the late spring of 2008 revealed the magnitude of the foreign fighter facilitation network. During the operation, 150 fighters, mostly foreign, were killed in just one week's time.⁷⁴ Reports suggested there were more than 500 fighters in the district, most of them foreign.⁷⁵ Coalition forces in Helmand have even reported "syndicates" of militants moving back and forth across the Helmand-Pakistan border, including Pakistanis, and elements of Al Qaeda.⁷⁶

Larger units range in size from groups of twelve to thirty-plus fighters.⁷⁷ They typically carry out more sophisticated attacks, such as coordinated, multi-directional ambushes or raids on ANP fortifications in Taliban-controlled territory.⁷⁸ Foreign fighters are better trained to conduct these sophisticated attacks. Suicide bombers in Helmand are also more likely to be foreign. Their deaths will not be mourned by local families and relatives, potentially eroding public support for Taliban operations and will not start the vicious cycle of retributive justice that is part of the *pash-tunwali code*. Suicide attackers are often trained in

Baluchistan and sent into Helmand, instructed to report to a specific commander in Helmand to receive operational instructions.⁷⁹

THE TALIBAN'S CAMPAIGN PLAN 2007-2009

From 2006 to 2007, coalition forces and allies struck a serious blow to the QST's leadership. In December 2006, the QST's senior strategist, Mullah Akhtar Osmani, was killed during an air-strike in Helmand.⁸⁰ Then in March 2007, Mullah Obaidullah was arrested by Pakistani Security Forces.⁸¹ Obaidullah was the former defense minister of the Taliban's ousted regime and thought to be an acting senior deputy of Mullah Omar.⁸² Two months later in May, Mullah Dadullah was killed by coalition forces in Helmand while visiting his family.⁸³ The one-legged commander was considered one of the most senior commanders in Helmand, also serving on the QST's *rahbari shura*.⁸⁴ In March 2007, coalition forces reported militants massing in the district of Sangin.⁸⁵ It is possible that these forces had been "called-up" by QST commanders to prepare for the Taliban's late-spring campaign.

The QST issued loose, overarching guidance about how to fight the coalition. In May 2007, the Taliban announced the initiation of Operation *Kamin* (Pashto for "ambush").⁸⁶ *Kamin* stated the enemy's intent to "target our enemies and use our tactics, suicide bombs, remote-controlled [road-side bombs] and ambushes."⁸⁷ Absent from the Taliban's plan were explicit, overarching strategic objectives that their stated tactics were meant to achieve.

However, it remains unclear if the Taliban did indeed have implicit strategic objectives, or any specific campaign plan, because the operation never materialized. The loss of these senior Taliban commanders significantly degraded the QST's command and control over their forces within Helmand, to such an extent that they could not lead a spring-summer offensive. Attacks were

sporadic and largely disconnected in Helmand throughout the remainder of 2007, while the QST attempted to reconstitute their command and control structure.

The enemy began preparations for a spring offensive entitled Operation *Ebrat* (Pashto for "lesson") announced on March 27, 2008.⁸⁸ The *Ebrat* announcement included explicitly stated objectives, representing a coherent and organized campaign plan, an element absent from previous announcements. *Ebrat* was designed to restrict Afghan and coalition lines of operation, making it difficult for the coalition to supply and resource provincial-wide security and reconstruction efforts. The Taliban's spring offensive in Helmand was focused on surrounding Afghan and coalition forces in their main centers of operation- Lashkar Gah and Gereshk.⁸⁹ The Taliban began consolidating their positions surrounding the provincial

Taliban operations did not diminish during the late fall of 2008 as is normally the case.

capital of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk to the north. Enemy operations formed a belt stretching from Nawa in the south, to Nad Ali, and along the western edge of the Helmand River to Gereshk and above in the "green zone" stretching to Sangin. Operationally, the enemy sought to restrict Afghan and coalition movement along their critical lines of operation, disrupting their endeavors. The enemy's efforts were guided by "detailed plans and programs" issued by senior leadership in Quetta but not publicized by the Taliban's media wing.⁹⁰

Part of this unpublicized plan was likely a campaign of intimidation against high-level targets and the population.⁹¹ In May 2008, militants struck the helicopter of Governor Gulab Mangal as he attempted to land in Musa Qala to inaugurate the reconstruction of a mosque.⁹² One month later, the Taliban kidnapped and killed an Afghan journalist working for the BBC in Lashkar Gah, assassinated the district police chief and wounded the district chief in Marjah, and increased their destruction of cell towers to pressure officials to cut night-time service.⁹³ Enemy forces were increasingly concerned about the capability and legal

sanctioning via Afghan law to allow for tracking of fighters and commanders through their use of cell phones.⁹⁴ In late-summer, Taliban gunmen killed a mid-level judge from Gereshk and raided a boy's school in Marjah, burning books and classrooms.⁹⁵

Typically, the Afghan winter had curtailed Taliban operations and significantly slowed their operational tempo. However, the Taliban's operations did not diminish during the late fall of 2008 as is normally the case. From the fall of 2008 until the spring of 2009, the Taliban continued to pursue the objectives set forth in *Ebrat*. This late-season effort was meant to achieve the element of surprise, further enabling the Taliban's expansion when it was least expected. The continued offensive through the winter months may show Mullah Barader's ability effectively to exercise his authority and command and control over operations in Helmand.

Following on the heels of Operation *Ebrat* and the surprise winter offensive, the Taliban's senior leadership in Quetta issued guidance for the launch of a new spring offensive, entitled Operation *Nasrat* (Pashto for "Victory").⁹⁶ Prior to *Nasrat*, QST senior leadership began efforts to centralize their command over the southern insurgency by removing and replacing personnel in the field. Although it is unclear when this determination was made, it is likely that it was a result of the QST's evaluation of the *Ebrat* campaign. According to the Deputy Emir of the QST, "these changes were at diverse levels starting with senior officials and the officials of directorates and ending with commander of brigades... the changes in some military and administrative positions were a dire need and a persistent necessity... we realized this through our experiences and [lessons] learned from the fields."⁹⁷ Accordingly, these changes upset a portion of rank-and-file Taliban.⁹⁸ Mullah Barader has been described as a proactive commander, very much attuned to lessons learned and best practices and he might have ordered the changes. One new rule that he instituted is that senior QST commanders must spend at least two months a year on the ground with their fighters in Afghanistan.⁹⁹

The QST's reassertion of command over fighters in Afghanistan was evident as early as April 2009, when the QST ordered the assassination of Qari Sayed Ahmad, a moderate cleric in Kandahar who was a vocal opponent of the Taliban.¹⁰⁰ QST senior leadership was reportedly responsible for ordering the (unsuccessful) assassination of Ahmed Wali Karzai, the head of the Kandahar provincial council and the brother of President Hamid Karzai, one month later.¹⁰¹ Wali Karzai's is rumored to be heavily involved in the narcotics trade, although to date, Afghan and coalition forces have only produced circumstantial evidence of his involvement.¹⁰² Although the attempt was unsuccessful, it demonstrates the QST's willingness to target some of the most influential political actors in all of Afghanistan.

Operation *Nasrat* was a more refined and effective iteration of the Taliban's previous campaign, *Ebrat*. *Nasrat* sought to target Afghan and coalition units, mobile convoys, and supply routes, and widened the campaign against diplomatic centers, high-ranking government officials, members of parliament, defense officials, and members of the interior and national security ministries.¹⁰³ Furthermore, the Taliban sought to tighten their encirclement of key coalition centers, particularly Lashkar Gah.¹⁰⁴ Lashkar Gah is home to the British Foreign Office in Helmand, housing the majority of the British civil-military element and home to the province-wide PRT.

The enemy also shifted its tactical approach, relying more frequently on IEDs to disrupt Afghan and joint patrols and conducting fewer coordinated ambushes. The enemy had been sustaining too many casualties engaging Afghan and joint patrols head on, either because of inferior weaponry or coalition air dominance. IEDs appeared in large numbers in Helmand. In mid-April 2009, an Estonian infantry company as part of Operation Black Tiger was conducting a joint operation with British, U.S. and Afghan army units in southwestern Nad Ali when they uncovered "scores of planted improvised explosive devices and two workshops containing hundreds of devices that had not yet been laid."¹⁰⁵ That and other large caches found at the time indicated that the Taliban

was preparing for possible coalition and Afghan efforts to disrupt their operations and the narcotics trade (as it was the poppy harvest season.)¹⁰⁶ The increase in IEDs and sophisticated weaponry in and around Nad Ali suggested that the area remained a key command and control and logistics hub for the Taliban, even after Black Tiger.

The enemy sought to close-off main and secondary roads in order to restrict Afghan and coalition forces freedom of movement.¹⁰⁷ Logistics have increasingly become a focus of the Taliban's campaign plan in Helmand since 2007. Nasrat called on private construction companies, transport companies, contractors, owners of vehicles and drivers to "completely stop and end such dealings with Kabul and Americans," warning that the mujahideen would take action against them if they did not comply.¹⁰⁸

THE ENEMY SYSTEM IN HELMAND

In order to understand how the enemy conducted its increasingly sophisticated campaigns, it is necessary to understand how it is organized across the province. The enemy system in Helmand Province can be divided into three distinct but related enemy systems in the southern, central, and northern Helmand River Valley. The southern Helmand River Valley serves two main purposes. The first is to facilitate the movement of foreign fighters and weapons to the enemy's main center of gravity in central Helmand. The second is to facilitate the refining, storage and eventual movement of narcotics out of Helmand, mainly through the province's southern border with Pakistan. Central Helmand is the enemy's center of gravity in the province. The heart of the enemy system is located west of the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah and around the province's economic center in Gereshk in the Nahri Sarraj district. The enemy system in northern Helmand is entrenched along the Helmand and Musa Qala Rivers, in and around the fertile farmland mainly used for opium cultivation. Although the enemy has focused its offensive operation in and around the province's two main population centers of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk, it continues effectively to dominate the terrain

surrounding nearly all district centers throughout the province.

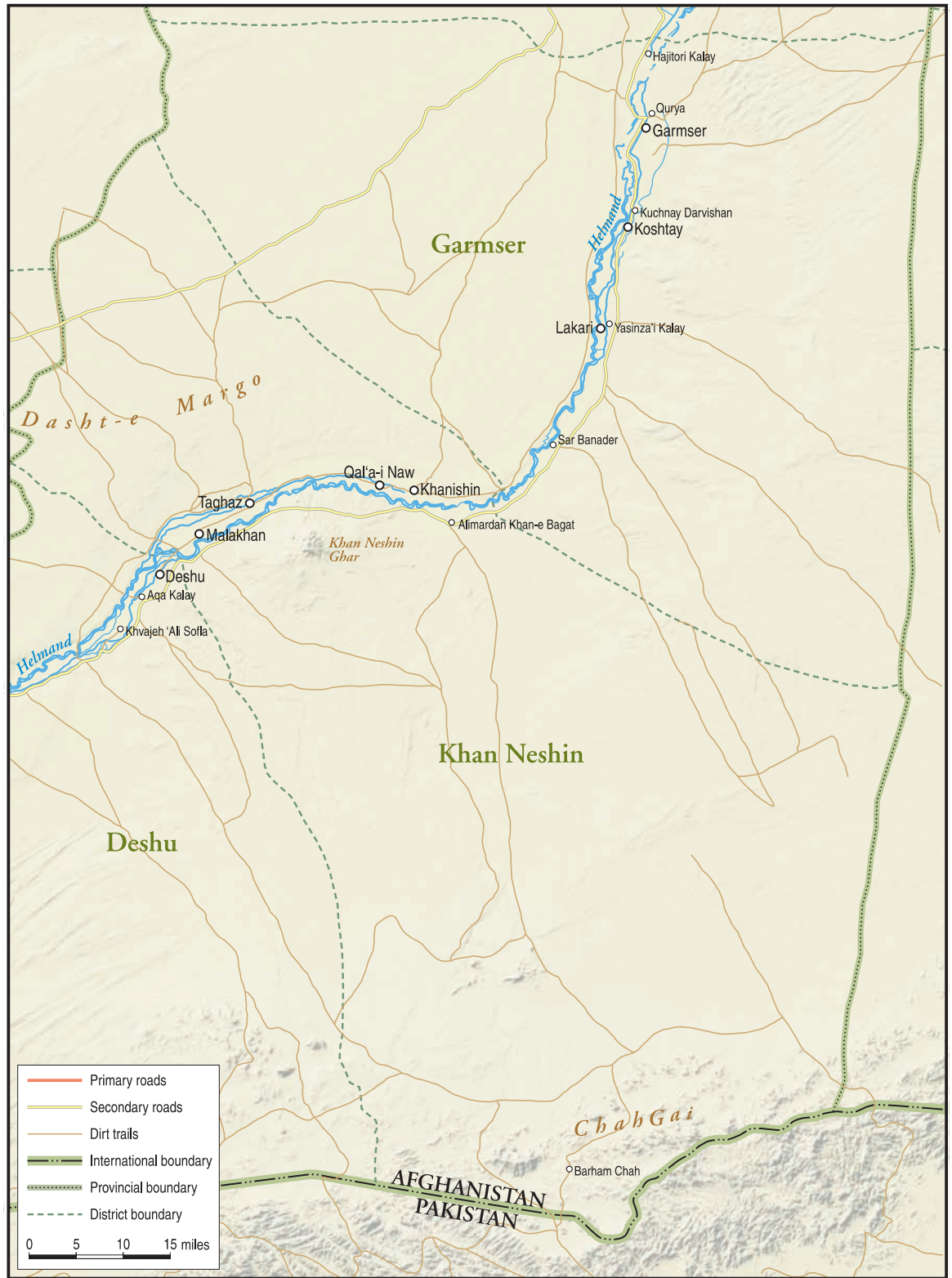
HELMAND RIVER SOUTH

Historically, militant forces have long sought to control southern Helmand and the border area with Pakistan. Southern Helmand province includes the lightly populated districts of Deshu, Khan Neshin (Reg-e Khan Neshin) and Garmser.¹⁰⁹ The southern Helmand River is the key transit route for fighters and weapons flowing into Helmand while refined and unrefined narcotics are smuggled out. Primarily, Helmand's south serves as a gathering point for foreign fighters, weapons and other supplies that are allocated to enemy operations throughout the entire province. The southern enemy system is far less active in terms of attacks against Afghan and coalition forces, primarily due to the relative absence of coalition forces and sizable population centers in the Taliban-dominated south.

BARHAM CHAH

The southernmost point of the Helmand River enemy system is Barham Chah, a remote bazaar town in Helmand's expansive southern desert, opposite the Chagai Hills area of Pakistan's Baluchistan region. Barham Chah "has a drugs bazaar that is reputed to be one of the biggest in the country for the transit of opium and heroin into Pakistan and Iran," according to Helmand's provincial government spokesman Daud Ahmadi.¹¹⁰ The Afghan government does not control the area, which serves as a "gateway into Afghanistan for militants and weapons."¹¹¹ Barham Chah is a key node in the supply line for the Helmand River enemy system. Foreign fighters, weapons and improvised explosive device (IED) components are transited into Afghanistan, while refined heroin and other narcotics are smuggled out.

The vast majority of foreign fighters that enter Helmand through Barham Chah come from any one of the numerous madrassas in Baluchistan or from the Girdi Jangal area, which is home to the massive Girdi Jangal Afghan refugee camp. Aid-



MAP 2 | SOUTHERN HELMAND PROVINCE

ing their passage are the ancient smuggling trails (Dasht-i-Margo) that run from the border with Pakistan to the southern reaches of the Helmand River, an area known as the Fish Hook, named for its extreme bend resembling a fish hook.

THE FISH HOOK

Deshu is the southern anchor of the “Fish Hook,” an area of the lower Helmand River which also runs through Khan Neshin and Garmser districts. The majority of Deshu’s population resides in and around the district capital, Deshu and the towns of Malakhan and Taghaz, marking the southernmost point of known Taliban activity along the Helmand River.¹¹²

Deshu district is situated in Afghanistan’s extreme south, accounting for half of Helmand’s 160 km-long border with Pakistan’s Baluchistan province. Home to a sizable portion of Helmand’s Ishaqzai tribe, a sub tribe of Helmand’s Durrani Pashtuns, Deshu shares its western border with Nimruz province which abuts Iran. The Taliban have been able to operate with impunity in Deshu and Khan Neshin in the absence of a governmental or ISAF presence.¹¹³ Deshu has been a sanctuary for militants in the Helmand River enemy system and a hub for narcotics that are smuggled south along the Helmand River.¹¹⁴ Deshu lies along the lines of communication for the movement of fighters, weapons, and narcotics across the Helmand-Pakistan border and perhaps even from neighboring Nimruz.

The district of Khan Neshin, long a Taliban stronghold, is approximately fifty kilometers north of Deshu along the Helmand River.¹¹⁵ The Taliban have used the district center of Khan Neshin and its ancient Jugroom Fort complex—a fortified river stronghold ringed by watchtowers—as the center of their operations in the district.¹¹⁶ Khan Neshin is best-known for its bazaar, much like Deshu.¹¹⁷ Prior to 2009, this area was almost entirely off-limits to coalition and Afghan forces. British and Afghan forces began to develop an operating picture of the lower Helmand River enemy system only after Operation *Aabi Toora* (Pashtu for ‘Blue Sword’) was conducted in February

2009. According one of the British commanders, “before our arrival no-one knew what was here – it was largely a blank map.”¹¹⁸

Lakari and Koshtay are located approximately fifty-five kilometers north of Khan Neshin on the Helmand River. British forces knew little about the area prior to the launch of Operation *Kapcha Salaam* (Pashtu for ‘Cobra Salute’) in late January 2009. Their Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) was insufficient, as they were forced to withdraw after finding themselves three miles beyond Lakari, literally “off the map” in enemy territory.¹¹⁹ During the retreat, enemy fighters pursued the withdrawing British and Afghan forces.

Koshtay had served for years as a major southern operating point for the Helmand River enemy system, serving as a supply hub for bomb-making equipment and narcotics.¹²⁰ According to local reports, many of the fighters who transit north through Koshtay are foreign.¹²¹

Koshtay and Lakari became the main transit hub for insurgents between April and October 2008. U.S. Marines from the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) launched an operation to clear Garmser, just miles to the north in April 2008. This caused the enemy system to shift south to Koshtay and Lakari to avoid unnecessary contact and interaction with U.S. forces. These two towns may now be more important to the enemy than Garmser in terms the supply line for narcotics, fighters, and weapons.¹²²

Garmser district, which runs almost the entire length of southern Helmand province, shares Helmand’s border with Pakistan. Garmser’s terrain is flat, arid desert interrupted only by the channels and banks of the Helmand River that runs through the district. The majority of Garmser’s population lives the fertile area surrounding the Helmand River. Garmser served as the major southern hub for Helmand River enemy system prior to April 2008, functioning as a sanctuary and the gateway to the heart of the Helmand province and the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, just fifty kilometers north along the Helmand River. The area had “long been used as a planning,

staging and logistics hub” for the Taliban and as a key node in the narcotics network running the entire length of the Helmand River Valley according to details uncovered during the course of the Marine operation in and around Garmser.¹²³ The Marines faced significant resistance during their clearing operation, as fighters flowed into the area from across the province.¹²⁴ They also observed fighters moving south to supply hubs in Koshtay and Lakari to obtain arms.¹²⁵ The intensity of the fight was likely due to the timing of the operation, coming during the final phases of the spring opium harvest.

The ferocity of the Taliban resistance is telling of Garmser’s strategic significance to the enemy. The Taliban typically have not sought to engage U.S. or British forces directly during the course of an operation, as they are usually outnumbered and outgunned. Instead, they retreat and employ a range of asymmetric tactics, such as the laying of IEDs to fight the Coalition. The enemy’s attempt to hold Garmser, relying on reinforcements from surrounding areas, suggests that they were reluctant to lose the key terrain and drug markets in the district’s main bazaar, even though they were eventually driven south. They occupied Garmser in force; an estimated 400 militants were killed during the month-long operation.¹²⁶ Marines also found significant quantities of weapons and drug caches.¹²⁷ The Marines had planned for the operation to last only weeks, but they discovered that the security situation in Garmser was worse than expected and they remained in the area until September 2008. During that time, they operated out of Camp Dwyer, approximately fifteen kilometers west of Garmser.

The Marines reported that prior to their arrival the Taliban would evict local villagers and take over their houses.¹²⁸ Their houses would then be used as storage areas to stockpile weapons and as a gathering point for fighters traveling north from the Pakistani border.¹²⁹

By mid-July 2008, the Marines operating in Garmser reported that the security situation in the district was beginning to improve and the city’s bazaar was flourishing once again.¹³⁰ Yet,

the flurry of enemy activity to the north in central Helmand suggests that the enemy was able to carry out its campaign despite the Marine’s attempts to cut enemy supply lines at Garmser. By mid-August 2008, enemy forces in Nad Ali were consolidating their control over the district, forcing the abandonment of two ANP checkpoints in the district center.¹³¹ The enemy’s consolidation in Nad Ali was a concentrated effort to expand their territorial control surrounding the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah.

The 24th MEU handed over responsibility for Garmser to Afghan and British forces upon its departure from the theater in early September 2008. The Taliban worked to reestablish a foothold in Garmser after a few months. Fighters operated out of the district with relative impunity, although less than before April 2008. British patrols would occasionally encounter IEDs or suicide bombers there. The British operated out of small bases and “[patrolled] only within reach of their bases to avoid the risk of being cut off.”¹³² They avoided patrols on Route Cowboy, the main north-south stretch of road in the district, also known as “IED Alley.”¹³³ Consequently, the Taliban managed to increase their presence in Garmser over the course of the late fall 2008 and early winter of 2009, re-establishing a key logistics and facilitation operation in the district. By May 2009, the Taliban were “preparing, building defences, digging more escape tunnels, bringing in foreign fighters and other reinforcements and planting IEDs everywhere, planning to use them more like a conventional minefield defence.”¹³⁴

HELMAND RIVER CENTRAL

Central Helmand spans the districts of Nawa (Nawa-i-Barakzayi), Nad Ali, Nahri Sarraj, and Lashkar Gah. The Lashkar Gah district is home to the identically-named provincial capital city, and the largest concentration of Helmand’s population. Central Helmand is known as the breadbasket of Afghanistan for the expansive acreage of irrigated farmland that punctuates the landscape immediately surrounding the river. The land along the Helmand River is marked by irrigation channels

and ditches, many of which were built as part of a U.S. development program in the 1950s.¹³⁵

In accordance with Operation *Ebrat*, and again with Operation *Nasrat*, the enemy's main objective has been to surround Afghan and coalition installations and "encounter them."¹³⁶ The provincial capital of Lashkar Gah is essentially surrounded by enemy strongholds that form a belt stretching from Nawa in the south, to Nad Ali, and along the western edge of the Helmand River to Gereshk. Throughout 2008 and 2009, the enemy's main offensive efforts have been directed against Afghan and coalition targets throughout central Helmand, particularly Lashkar Gah and the economically significant and centrally located city of Gereshk.

NAWA

The Taliban control the Nawa district, which is known mainly for its poppy production. Nawa has two agricultural zones. The first, a relatively narrow, thirty kilometer-long expanse of farmland, leads directly into the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. The second lies several kilometers west of the district center near the town of Marjah. The Afghan National Security Forces maintain little presence in the area, aside from a few scattered Afghan National Police (ANP) check posts. Consequently, the Taliban maintain freedom of movement there, which they use to support the efforts to the north of Nawa in Nad Ali. Nawa marks the point at which fighters and equipment flowing north from Garmsar are funneled into Lashkar Gah, the enemy's main effort within the province.

Strategically, the area is important to the enemy, both because of the farming land devoted to poppy production and because of its proximity to Lashkar Gah. The terrain in and around Nawa is ideal for enemy caches, mainly of raw opium collected from the surrounding fields, but also of weapons and explosives that are used to launch attacks on occasional joint patrols of Afghan and British forces and ANP checkpoints.¹³⁷ The terrain is dotted with irrigated farmland and small compounds that stretch for several kilometers, connected only by narrow dirt roads and canals.



PHOTO 3 | U.S. MARINE PATROL IN NAWA. (U.S. MARINE CORPS PHOTO)

The Taliban consolidated their grip on Nawa throughout much of 2008 and 2009, although they had maintained a strong presence in the district for years. The Taliban had closed to within five kilometers of Lashkar Gah. In October 2008, according to reports,¹³⁸ Afghan and British forces launched a joint operation in an attempt to drive the Taliban south. The operation netted weapons, ammunition, motorbikes and other vehicles but did not achieve any long-term gains, because the forces did not remain in the area to hold the ground.¹³⁹ Joint forces launched several other operations over the next few months to drive the Taliban out or to "dominate ground," but still did not maintain a permanent presence in the area. The Taliban consequently continued to operate in the area with relative impunity, laying IEDs in key terrain used by infrequent joint patrols.¹⁴⁰ Afghan and British forces essentially had to retake the terrain each time they entered the area.

The Taliban presence in the district became more noticeable during the late winter and early spring months of 2009, the time of the year when the enemy typically reinforces southern areas of Afghanistan. They began to appear in larger numbers, and they launched more frequent attacks on police checkpoints.¹⁴¹ The Taliban began to capitalize on their earlier exploits in Nawa in the late spring and summer of 2009. On May 13, 2009 ANP operating in the district were forced to retreat as Taliban fighters began to overwhelm their posts.¹⁴² The Taliban surrounded the area with eight mines to prevent coalition and Afghan forces from re-taking the terrain.¹⁴³ However, in

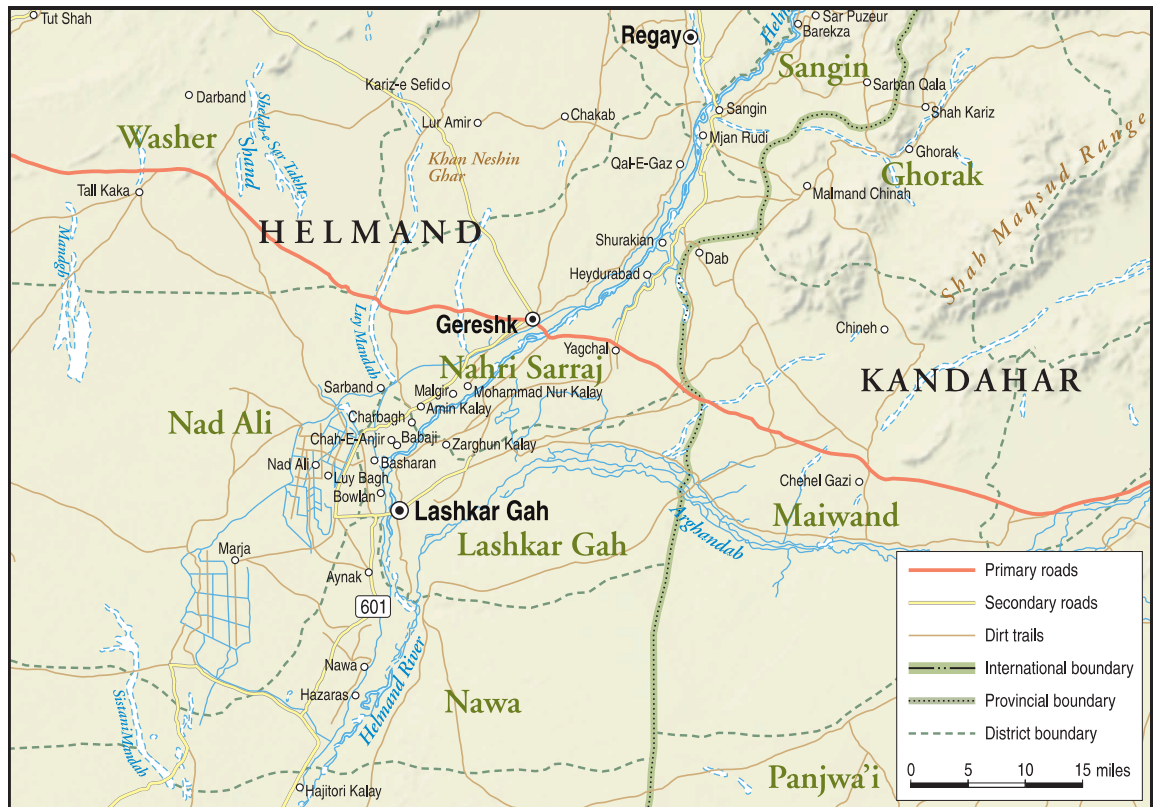
response to the Taliban offensive, coalition and Afghan forces launched an operation in the area to push back the advancing enemy lines. On May 15 2009, Mullah Malik, a senior Taliban military commander thought to be responsible for seven districts in Helmand and seven other lower-level commanders were killed by an ISAF air-strike in the Zarsahib area during the operation.¹⁴⁴ Mullah Malik is an example of capable Taliban leadership that is most often required to coordinate an enemy offensive. While the coalition and Afghan counteroffensive was able to temporarily push the Taliban out of areas in close proximity to Lashkar Gah, the failure to maintain a permanent troop presence on the ground negated any lasting success. The Taliban's sustained effort to establish a foothold in Nawa was achieved by late spring of 2009, further consolidating their control of key territory surrounding Lashkar Gah.

MARJAH

The town of Marjah lies approximately ten

kilometers west of Nawa district center and only twenty-five kilometers from the provincial capital. The province's main road runs north, parallel to the Helmand River, from Garmser to Marjah and continues to the city of Lashkar Gah. The terrain around Marjah is similar to Nawa district center - farmland used for poppy production, divided by of narrow canals and dirt paths. The Marine operation in Garmser which began in April 2008, forced the Taliban to relocate below and above the district. In September 2008, Marjah and the Nad Ali district immediately to the north were captured by the Taliban after they drove out the relatively weak police force that occupied several posts in the districts.¹⁴⁵ It is likely that Marjah was transformed into an enemy command and control hub shortly after the Marines began their clearing of Garmser. Since that time, and possibly even earlier, Marjah has served as an enemy weapons hub, a primary gathering point for fighters and commanders in central Helmand, and as the main hub for the central Helmand narcotics trade.¹⁴⁶

The Loy Charahi (Loy Chareh) Bazaar is the cen-



MAP 3 | CENTRAL HELMAND PROVINCE

ter of narcotics and enemy activity in Marjah.¹⁴⁷ The bazaar has probably served as the main narcotics and IED transit center in and around the Marjah-Nad Ali area since 2008. A joint British and Afghan operation in May 2009 aimed to seize the bazaar because it was an important operational and financial hub, as shown by the enemy's reaction to the coalition forces. "Senior militant leaders [directed] neighboring commanders to assemble fighters and reinforce the fighting in an effort to recapture the drug safe haven. Additional enemy forces from Pakistan have also been called upon to reinforce the ongoing battle."¹⁴⁸ The enemy placed a high value on protecting their base, even if it meant a conventional confrontation with superior Coalition forces.

The weapons, narcotics and materials seized by Coalition forces in the joint operation revealed the extent to which the Loy Charahi Bazaar had served as a narcotics hub for all of Helmand. Over the course of a three-day operation, Afghan National Army commandos of the 205th Corps assisted by coalition forces killed "47 militants and seized the single-largest drug cache by international forces in Afghanistan to date."¹⁴⁹ The seizure netted over a hundred tons of opium, morphine, heroin, hashish and poppy seeds—an astounding amount of narcotics compared to previous finds.¹⁵⁰ A host of precursor chemicals for refining narcotics were also found, as well as an assortment of explosives and IED materials.¹⁵¹

NAD ALI

The Nad Ali (Nad-e Ali) district to the north of Marjah was the main support zone for the Taliban enemy system in Helmand, mainly focused on Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. Afghan officials referred to it as "the most dangerous place" in the province.¹⁵² Nad Ali hosts a combination of enemy fighters, narcotics traffickers, and a spectrum of Taliban senior leadership and mid-level commanders. Nad Ali is perhaps the most strategic

piece of terrain for the enemy in Helmand. The area is difficult to patrol as it is surrounded by the Nahr-e Burghr canal to the north and dissected by several others, including the Shamalan Canal. Additionally, Nad Ali is home to key wadi or riverbed crossings into the western edge of Lashkar Gah, including Route 601 which runs across the Bolan Bridge into the provincial capital.¹⁵³ Additionally, Nad Ali and points to the north provide direct access to the city of Gereshk, which is located along Highway One (the Ring Road) linking the neighboring provinces of Nimruz and Farah to the west and Kandahar to the east.

In February 2008, then-Helmand Governor Asadullah Wafa announced the beginning of an eradication campaign in Nad Ali near Bolan village, to be carried out by a special police force sent from Kabul.¹⁵⁴ Governor Wafa stated, "the police should completely eradicate the illicit crops without discrimination while carrying out the campaign."¹⁵⁵ This campaign, though intended to target Taliban fund-

Nad Ali is perhaps the most strategic piece of terrain for the enemy in Helmand.

ing, was most harmful to local poppy farmers. The Taliban attempted to capitalize on the opium farmer's discontent and it was soon reported that farmers in the village of Marjah were joining forces with the Taliban to fight the eradication teams.¹⁵⁶ They also gained favor with the local population by protecting opium fields. According to a local Taliban commander Mullah Mohammad Qasem, "we prevent the destruction of poppy fields because we have bought [weapons] on the black market out of heroin money."¹⁵⁷ The support of the local population allowed the insurgency to flourish in the area.

The Taliban seized Nad Ali in September 2008 and drove out the remaining Afghan police. This was not simply a major propaganda victory. Rather, the Taliban brought a semblance of law and order to the previously lawless district. According to one local resident in Nad Ali, "when the Government was in charge, the police were beating people and stealing from them... [but] at the first bazaar under the new Taleban regime, there was

no stealing by the Taliban and the only beating was of a man caught stealing a motorbike.”¹⁵⁸ He went on to state, “the Taliban covered his face and clothes in the black oil... then they paraded him through the bazaar... then they beat him and threw him out. He won't do it again.”¹⁵⁹ This is but one example of Taliban's dominance over certain population centers.

Afghan and ISAF forces were able to regain control of Nad Ali district center in October 2008. After days of heavy fighting (an indication of the Taliban's desire to hold the area), Afghan security forces established a headquarters building in the district center. Though they remained there after the operation, the British forces did not.¹⁶⁰ The small Afghan force was largely confined to the area surrounding the district center and did not patrol much beyond that, ceding the overwhelming majority of Nad Ali to the Taliban. When the ANP did patrol, they were frequently ambushed by groups as large as large as eighteen fighters. Nearly all ambush attempts were coordinated, multi-pronged attacks using small arms fire, machine guns, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs).¹⁶¹ Often, coalition close air support was called in to engage the enemy positions, generating heavy enemy casualties and, in some cases, causing civilian casualties.¹⁶² Maintaining their dominance of greater Nad Ali was in accord with the objectives put forth in Ebrat, to surround Afghan and coalition concentrations of troops and to engage these forces through a wide array of offensive measures.

In December 2008, British forces launched Operation *Sond Chara*, during which they cleared several areas in northern Nad Ali and constructed two patrol bases in Shin Kalay and Chah-e-Anjir.¹⁶³ Chah-e-Anjir is strategically located on a major offshoot of the Helmand River, west of the Taliban strongholds of Basharan and Babaji. Chah-e-Anjir was identified as a “key enemy command and control and logistics node, which was linked to the recent attacks on Lashkar Gah.”¹⁶⁴ According to the UK's Ministry of Defense, the clearing operation netted “[a host] of Taliban equipment,” previous finds in the area netted motorbikes, satellite phones, walkie-talkies,

mortar rounds, small arms and machine guns, ammunition, IEDs and IED-making equipment, raw opium and various other munitions and supplies.¹⁶⁵ While the vast majority of British forces returned to Camp Bastion after the conclusion of the operation, the ANP held their patrol bases and conduct patrols in select areas, mainly out of Patrol Base Argyll on the edge of Nad Ali district center.¹⁶⁶

The Afghan Police did not maintain a significant presence in the area. Those who were present prior to September 2008 were distrusted by the local population. According to villagers in the area, “the government's police force was so brutal and corrupt that they welcomed the Taliban as liberators.” According to accounts from local villagers, the ANP's exploits included beatings, robbery and rape.¹⁶⁷ Locals stated that police would practice “bachabazi” (sex with pre-pubescent boys); “if the boys were out in the fields, the police would come by and rape them... you can go to any police base and you will see these boys. They hold them until they are finished with them and then let the child go.”¹⁶⁸

LASHKAR GAH

The capital of Helmand province, Lashkar Gah, is situated between the Helmand and Arghandab Rivers, which intersect just south of the city. Lashkar Gah is home to approximately 125,000, including full time residents and internally displaced people who have fled the insecurity of Taliban-controlled rural districts.¹⁶⁹ Modern Lashkar Gah was constructed by American engineers in the 1950s, with city blocks linked by wide dirt roads. Lashkar Gah is the seat of Helmand's provincial government, Afghan Army and Police headquarters, and the heavily-fortified complex of the British-led Provincial Reconstruction Team, and the headquarters of the UK's Task Force Helmand. The Taliban maintain freedom of movement across the Helmand River in a south-north belt around the capital. Yet, the city itself is relatively stable compared to its surrounding districts.

Although Taliban mass-infantry assaults have been rare in southern Afghanistan, the largest in

Helmand occurred in October 2008, when the Taliban launched a failed attempt to besiege Lashkar Gah. The capital is home to such high-value targets as the British Civil-Military compound and provincial PRT headquarters, the Afghan National Police headquarters and the governor's mansion. The Taliban's attempted raid on Lashkar Gah was the most spectacular attack of the *Ebrat* campaign, demonstrating sophisticated operational planning and oversight.

On the night of October 11, 2008, enemy vehicles began moving towards Lashkar Gah from an area south of Luy Bagh, near the Nad Ali district center. Approximately thirty minutes later, British headquarters observed "four separate groupings" gathering, attempting to "plan an attack on three different sides [of the city], with a blocking force on the fourth side."¹⁷⁰ The main assault force planned to cross the Bolan Bridge in western Lashkar Gah, along the road to the Nad Ali district.¹⁷¹ At the same time, another contingent of fighters aimed to enter northern and southern Lashkar Gah while a fourth group aimed presumably to block Afghan and coalition forces from fleeing to the east. Not only was this the first major Taliban offensive against Lashkar Gah, it was the first attack in Helmand that demonstrated such a high level of sophistication.

Observing the enemy movements, British forces called in Apaches from Camp Bastion, approximately thirty miles to the northwest, as well as fixed-wing aircraft that regularly patrolled the south to strike the enemy positions.¹⁷² While number of enemy fighters participating in the assault reportedly totaled 150, conservative casualty estimates from the air strikes totaled approximately sixty fighters killed or wounded in the four hours of intense fighting.

Three days later, a second wave of militants attacked police outposts that ring the city. During the assault, ANA forces under the mentorship of a Canadian Operation Mentoring Liaison Team (OMLT) repelled the attack, killing approximately eighteen militants.¹⁷³ Although the Taliban suffered a stinging defeat in the offensive, they managed to threaten the relative stability of Helmand's

provincial capital. This assault scored a substantial propaganda victory for Taliban commanders, raising the possibility, if only for a moment, that the Afghan-ISAF stronghold could fall into enemy hands.

One possible explanation is that the attack may have been a Taliban counteroffensive, launched to relieve the pressure from the Marines' operations in Garmser. The Taliban likely assumed that if they were able to break into the city, the Marines in Garmser would have been forced to pull out and move into Lashkar Gah to repel the Taliban offensive. The close-quarters fighting would certainly have benefited the Taliban and rendered the coalition's use of airpower ineffective. From late-summer 2008 through the fall, the Taliban systematically consolidated their positions surrounding the provincial capital while activity in northern and southern Helmand abated, with the notable exception of Nahri Sarraj district and the district center of Gereshk. While the Marines continued to operate to the south in Garmser, the Taliban seized on the opportunity to reconsolidate and conduct a sweeping offensive on Lashkar Gah.

The attempted siege of Lashkar Gah was preceded by the Taliban's entrenchment in key districts surrounding the capital—demonstrating the enemy's effective organization in accordance with their primary objectives. The Taliban had consolidated their positions in Nawa to the south, Nad Ali and Marjah to the west and Babaji and Basharan to the north. Not only did these strategic positions establish a firm presence around the capital, they were also within operationally supporting distances of each other to allow for the shifting of men and materiel around the battlefield to support offensive or defensive measures. The coalition's failure to recognize and react to how the enemy was operating is symptomatic of the larger strategic failings in the province. The failure to understand the enemy has resulted in the failure to prioritize resources in critical areas.

After the October 2008 attack, Afghan and coalition forces realized the magnitude of the Taliban's build-up around the provincial capital. Joint forces launched several operations over the next

few months to drive the Taliban out or to “dominate ground,” but they still did not maintain a permanent and sufficiently resourced presence in the area following their operations. The Taliban consequently continued to operate in the area with relative impunity, laying IEDs in key terrain utilized by infrequent joint patrols.¹⁷⁴

While the enemy to the south, west, and north of Lashkar Gah has not sought to control the city itself, it has executed regular attacks on joint patrols on the outskirts of the capital.¹⁷⁵ The enemy’s main activity around Lashkar Gah is the tactical placement of IEDs.¹⁷⁶ Coalition forces operating in Helmand often varied their routes in order to avoid enemy IEDs, yet the Taliban seemed to be one step ahead. Marines began plotting their routes using a simplistic GPS tracking unit and discovered that patrols systematically converged at natural “choke points.”¹⁷⁷ Thus, rather than enemy IED teams targeting patrol routes, they were simply targeting choke points, achieving significant success.¹⁷⁸ Typically, the IEDs within the city are detonated by a command-wire, a remote, and to a much lesser degree, pressure-plate triggered mines (which frequently result in civilian casualties since insurgents do not control the time of detonation).¹⁷⁹ Afghan and coalition patrols are not the only target of Taliban attacks. On one occasion, an IED cell targeted an Afghan construction firm responsible for asphaltting a stretch of road leading from Lashkar Gah to Marjah, presumably to deter the construction of the road, which would make possible joint patrols into the heart of the Taliban’s operations.¹⁸⁰ The Taliban prefer dirt roads where IEDs are easier to bury and harder to detect.

In March 2009, the enemy’s boldness and tactical execution noticeably improved, evidenced by a several month stretch of high profile attacks. These attacks marked the beginning of the Taliban’s Nasrat campaign. The enemy successfully executed targeted assassinations within Lashkar Gah and launched coordinated attacks on key targets, a distinct tactical shift compared to previous patterns of violence in the city.¹⁸¹ On March 7, 2009, two sons of an official of Afghanistan’s National Directorate of Security (NDS) were killed when

explosives planted under a desk in a general store owned by an intelligence official in Lashkar Gah detonated, killing the two and injuring another.¹⁸² The NDS is the domestic intelligence agency of the government of Afghanistan. The organization is considered highly capable by Afghan standards and is a prime target for Taliban attacks. Just over a week later, a roadside bomb struck the car of Dad Mohammad, a former mujahedeen commander and respected member of Afghanistan’s Wolesi Jirga (lower house of Parliament).¹⁸³ The incident occurred in the early afternoon on the outskirts of Lashkar Gah, killing Dad Mohammad, local police commander Abdul Samad Khaksar, and four bodyguards.¹⁸⁴

Dad Mohammad (also known as Amir Dado, Amir Dad Mohammad Khan) was an outspoken opponent of the Taliban, who served as Helmand’s NDS chief from the fall of the Taliban until his election to Parliament in 2005, in which capacity he also served as a member of the counternarcotics committee. During his tenure as Helmand’s intelligence chief, he was reportedly known for “mistreating” captured Taliban fighters.¹⁸⁵ Interestingly, the Taliban did not claim credit for this specific attack, but the group was probably responsible, as it did claim credit for an attack in June of 2006 in Sangin district that killed thirty-two of his relatives and friends.¹⁸⁶ The animosity between Mohammad and the Taliban was likely personal, but could have been magnified by his Alkozai tribal background as the Alkozais were a major military force in the alliance of militiamen who kept the Taliban away from Kandahar city prior to 2005.¹⁸⁷

Protecting the late-spring poppy harvest was also a Taliban priority, as shown by targeted attacks on Special Counter-Narcotics Police Force throughout March and April 2009. A suicide bomber in ANP uniform targeted a police convoy outside their headquarters in Lashkar Gah in mid-March.¹⁸⁸ The convoy was preparing to depart on a poppy eradication mission when it was struck by the attacker. Eleven died in the attack, while twenty-eight others were wounded.¹⁸⁹ A suicide bomber in early April approached a group of counter-narcotics officers on foot and detonated

his explosives, “killing two police officers and three civilians, two of them children.”¹⁹⁰ Whereas *Ebrat* warned ANSF and governmental officials about cooperating with the coalition, *Nasrat* demonstrated the Taliban’s increasing aptitude in carrying out such attacks.

The uptick in attacks continued into the late spring of 2009. Intelligence suggested that Taliban insurgents planned to launch another coordinated attack on Lashkar Gah from Marjah, this time targeting the compound of Helmand’s governor, Gulab Mangal. U.S. intelligence intercepted communication from Quetta in late April, signaling that a large-scale assault on Lashkar Gah was imminent.¹⁹¹ The QST issued a call for fighters from as far away as Waziristan in Pakistan.¹⁹² The enemy reportedly shipped in four Soviet ZPU-I anti-aircraft guns for the mission which is telling of the enemy’s ability to resource an offensive.¹⁹³

However, local commanders in Helmand pressed for a delayed launch to the operation because many of their fighters were still working to harvest the remainder of the season’s poppy.¹⁹⁴ Days later, British forces killed a local tribal leader with links to the Taliban. Once again, the Taliban postponed their assault, this time for a period of mourning. Meanwhile, an Afghan Army-led assault force was descending on the area, the main bazaar in Marjah likely meant to disrupt the Taliban’s main narcotics hub and command and control node in central Helmand. The force also uncovered sophisticated communications equipment at the location, a discovery which supports the notion of Marjah serving as a critical hub in the Taliban’s central Helmand network. Three days of fighting killed approximately sixty militants while approximately one hundred tons of narcotics and chemicals were seized in addition to weapons and explosives.¹⁹⁵ Despite the successes of the primary assault, the force was not allowed to pursue their secondary objective, a separate Taliban-run bazaar located in the heart of enemy controlled territory due to a lack of additional resources.¹⁹⁶ The following day, coalition intel-

ligence assets reported vehicles carrying away what was likely narcotics and Taliban weapons from the second bazaar.

Coalition forces identified thirty insurgents gathering on the outskirts of Lashkar Gah on May 15, 2009, and they called in air strikes, killing twenty-two militants including six commanders.¹⁹⁷ This high ratio of commanders to fighters is rare, suggesting that the execution of the planned attack required increased coordination and supervision or that the fighters may have been poorly trained or recent recruits. Weeks later, gunmen riding on a motorcycle executed a targeted assassination of the deputy chief of the Helmand central jail, Syed Mohammad, while he was shopping with his son in Safyan village.¹⁹⁸ Taliban spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi claimed responsibility for the killing.¹⁹⁹

The QST issued a call for fighters from as far away as Waziristan.

Furthermore, two minor Taliban commanders led an assault force of eight fighters in an attack on a police post in the village of Aynak, a small village within ten kilometers of Lashkar Gah.²⁰⁰ The attack was repelled by the police, who suffered

minimal casualties. It is troubling however that the Taliban were emboldened enough to attack a security post only kilometers from the provincial capital in the middle of the afternoon.²⁰¹ Contemporaneous with the attack on the Aynak police post, gunmen riding on a motorcycle executed a targeted assassination of the deputy chief of the Helmand central jail, Syed Mohammad, while he was shopping with his son in Safyan village.²⁰² Taliban spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi claimed responsibility for the killing.²⁰³

Interestingly, the level of attacks in Lashkar Gah in June 2009 returned to pre-March levels, and there were no high-profile attacks during this period. It is likely that senior commanders were preoccupied with countering Operation *Panchai Palang* (Pashto for ‘Panther’s Claw’), which was launched by British forces in mid-June in the area of Nad Ali, so much so that continuing opera-

tions in Lashkar Gah would no longer have been a primary objective.

BABAJI AND SPIN MASJID

Babaji is located roughly twenty-five kilometers north of Lashkar Gah, between the Helmand River and the Nahr-E-Bughra Canal. The area is entirely under the influence of the Taliban and elements of the narcotics trade, as the fertile terrain is predominately used to grow poppy. The area serves as a transit route for the enemy to points north, including Gereshk, Highway One, and Taliban strongholds in northern Helmand. The terrain is favorable for insurgents, who can manipulate the winding riverbeds of the Helmand River and navigate throughout the dense vegetation that spans the entire distance to Gereshk. Given the canalized terrain and dense vegetation, Afghan and coalition forces cannot easily conduct vehicle or foot patrols.

Just north of Babaji is the area of Spin Masjid. Spin Masjid and the surrounding village of Amin Kalay are known transit points for Taliban fighters and supplies flowing north and south.²⁰⁴ These villages also serve as known staging areas for attacks on supply convoys that run south from Highway One along the western edge of the green zone.²⁰⁵ In mid-February 2009, roughly 700 Afghan, British, Danish and Canadian troops launched an operation to clear the village and establish a police post in the area. After the police post was constructed, the assault force returned to Camp Bastion, leaving a small police force to hold the area. The assault force claimed to have “shut down” vital Taliban supply routes, but with only a minimal police force to hold the terrain, the Taliban regained control of the area almost soon after the assault force left the area.²⁰⁶ Within four months, British forces launched another large-scale operation to clear Babaji and Spin Masjid, in a clear indication that the any gains from the previous operation had been lost to the Taliban.

GERESHK

Gereshk, the district center of Nahri Sarraj (Nahr

Surkh), sits at the intersection of the Helmand River and Highway One, which runs through the center of the city. Gereshk has a population in the neighborhood of 50,000, roughly the size of Lashkar Gah.²⁰⁷ Gereshk is considered the economic center of the province, and is home to a sizable bazaar. Like Lashkar Gah, the city consists of sprawling mud-walled housing complexes in large city blocks that stretch nearly five kilometers from end to end. The British and U.S. Marines have established Camp Bastion and Camp Leatherneck, the headquarters of coalition forces in Helmand roughly thirty kilometers west of Gereshk.

The enemy to the immediate south and north of Gereshk is focused on launching attacks in the city itself and harassing Afghan and coalition patrols, FOBs, and checkpoints in the immediate vicinity. Like Lashkar Gah, the enemy does not seek to hold ground in the city itself and is only concerned with maintaining the perception of insecurity. Enemy objectives in Gereshk are limited to: harassing Afghan and coalition forces patrols and convoys inside and outside of the city, conducting IED and ambush attacks on Highway One and the main bazaar in Gereshk, and maintaining freedom of movement for fighters, weapons, and narcotics.

Enemy cells in the district employ a mixture of IEDs and coordinated ambushes, resourced through the numerous manufacturing facilities and storage caches located throughout the district, from as far south as Amim Kalay, east to Yagchal (Yakhcha), and north to Mirmandew.²⁰⁸ IED attacks have been most frequent in the district center, Highway One, and the immediate vicinity of Afghan and coalition bases.²⁰⁹ Enemy ambushes have not been particularly effective, especially against mounted patrols. Though the enemy may have the element of surprise, they are almost always outnumbered and outgunned. The enemy frequently sustains greater casualties than it inflicts, with the exception of attacks on dismounted coalition patrols.²¹⁰ Enemy ambushes are resourced through a host of weapons caches located throughout the Nahri Sarraj district, so that attacks on patrols can be more easily executed

and resourced. When Afghan and coalition forces ambushes are repelled, they often search the surrounding area and locate enemy weapons caches, resulting in a loss of enemy resources and enemy fighters.²¹¹

In addition to harassing patrols, the enemy has also attacked coalition bases and police checkpoints, seeking to challenge the notion that coalition forces are safe from attack on their bases.²¹² The majority of enemy attacks on fixed targets have been aimed at police checkpoints throughout the district.²¹³ These attacks are likely meant to intimidate Afghan Security Forces and dissuade them from interfering with the enemy's operations that run north and south along the Helmand River. Unlike coalition FOBs, police checkpoints are relatively exposed and present a much softer target. These attacks reflect the enemy's significant presence in the district and command of the surrounding terrain.

The enemy's most sophisticated and coordinated attacks focus on the district government headquarters and the local bazaar in Gereshk. Preventing Afghan and coalition forces from maintaining complete control of the bazaar is a top priority for the enemy, as the market is the center for narcotics and weapons trafficking in Nahri Sarraj. Their tactics also attempt to disrupt and discredit the functioning of the district government and security apparatus, in accord with Nasrat. These sophisticated attacks have been in the form of targeted assassinations, motorbike-born IEDs, multi-stage attacks aimed at inflicting mass casualties and a Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device attack (SVBIED).²¹⁴ Motorcycle bombs are relatively common in Helmand (much more so than SVBIEDs), likely because of the poor terrain and lack of traversable roads.²¹⁵

The most violent month for these attacks was May 2009. The timing of these attacks is significant. Although it is difficult to demonstrate causal-

ity, these attacks follow the announcement of Operation *Nasrat* on April 30, 2009.²¹⁶ In the first incident, an explosive-laden motorcycle was detonated in close proximity to the district headquarters building in Gereshk, across from the city's bazaar on May 3, 2009.²¹⁷ The attack killed one police official and three civilians, and injured six more.²¹⁸ An attacker on an explosive-laden motorcycle targeted an ISAF convoy, as it traveled through the district center only days later. The attack killed twelve civilians and wounded thirty-two others, including two policemen.²¹⁹ A suicide bomber detonated near a British patrol, killing two UK soldiers on the following day.²²⁰

The most sophisticated of the May attacks in Gereshk occurred just days later on May 10, 2009. A single suicide bomber detonated at a taxi stop in Gereshk district center targeting an Afghan

Police patrol. As ANA and ANP forces responded to the first attack, a second suicide bomber approached and detonated his bomb. Multi-stage attacks such as these are rare in Helmand, although they have occurred with relative frequency in neighboring Kandahar.

They are designed to inflict a maximum amount of casualties, targeting a concentrated group of responders to the initial, diversionary attack. Most casualties are caused by the follow-on attack. In all, four ANSF and three civilians were killed while approximately twenty others were wounded.²²¹

Another spectacular attack occurred on June 13, when an SVBIED drove into an ISAF convoy that was parked near a coalition base across from the Gereshk Bazaar. According to the district chief of Gereshk, Abdul Ahad, eight drivers were killed in the attack while twenty-one others were wounded.²²² Eight fuel tankers and four trucks were also destroyed in the attack.²²³ It is believed that the actual target of the SVBIED was a scheduled high-level meeting between British, Danish, and Afghan officials to discuss security problems plaguing Helmand province over the past several

In addition to harassing patrols, the enemy has also attacked coalition bases and police checkpoints

months; however, the meeting was canceled due to a tip warning of an attack in the district center that same day.²²⁴

SVBIEDs have been extremely rare in Helmand province, likely because of the lack of navigable roads. However, in neighboring Kandahar City, SVBIEDs attacks occur almost monthly. SVBIED cells are distinct from other suicide device-manufacturing cells. SVBIED production requires significantly more expertise and an entirely different set of resources than IED or suicide vest manufacturing cells. Although it remains unclear why there has only been one recorded SVBIED in Gereshk recently, it is most likely that the device was transported from Kandahar city and not produced within Helmand. Therefore, this suggests that Taliban commanders in the Helmand River Valley likely are linked to the QST in Kandahar city; however, the extent of this relationship is unclear.

In addition to being an attack zone, Gereshk and the greater Nahri Sarraj district also function in support of the narcotics network that operates throughout the Helmand River.²²⁵ One find in the district in early May 2009 netted nearly a half-ton of recently harvested opium in a compound along with other supplies, including remote-controlled bomb-making components and a fully stocked trauma room to treat wounded militants within a compound in Nahri Sarraj.²²⁶ While the majority of narcotics are smuggled out of Helmand through the Barham Chah bazaar into Pakistan, it is also likely that narcotics traffickers take advantage of the main highway to move narcotics east to Kandahar and west towards Iran through Nimruz, Farah, and Herat. In Kandahar in particular, the town of Spin Boldak on the border with Pakistan has been the site of enormous narcotics finds, especially during the course of 2008.²²⁷ The sheer size of these finds suggests, but does not prove, that narcotics from surrounding provinces such as Helmand are trafficked into Pakistan from Spin Boldak.²²⁸

WASHER

The district of Washer, due west of Nahri Sarraj

is largely desert. Washer is home to a key stretch of Highway One that runs across the entire length of central Helmand and is the key supply route for Camps Bastion and Leatherneck. The enemy operates freely in Washer from the district center where there is no permanent Afghan or coalition presence.²²⁹ Additionally, Washer is believed to be a secondary support zone for IED and suicide attacks in and around Gereshk.²³⁰

HELMAND RIVER NORTH

Northern Helmand province includes the Nahri Sarraj, Sangin, Kajaki, Now Zad, Musa Qala, and Baghran districts. Over the past several years Taliban operations have increasingly focused on the northern Helmand River Valley area between Sangin and Kajaki. This area is not only home to the north's main narcotics network, but also acts as a facilitation hub for QST activities in Uruzgan and possibly even Kandahar.²³¹ The enemy has also maintained firm control over the northwestern districts of Washer and Now Zad, and it has also sought to disrupt Afghan and ISAF efforts in the historically significant district of Musa Qala. The Taliban have been most welcomed by the Ishaqzai tribe in Sangin, after years of the tribe's marginalization under former Helmand governor Sher Mohammed Akhundzadeh.²³²

SANGIN

Sangin lies approximately thirty kilometers north of Gereshk, just beyond the small town of Qal-E-Gaz. The main road that travels north to Sangin from the Helmand-Kandahar border is Route 6II, which continues northeast from Sangin to the mountainous town of Kajaki. Route 6II is dotted with British Patrol Bases and FOBs and is the main transit route between Sangin and Kajaki.²³³ Located at the intersection of the Musa Qala and Helmand Rivers, Sangin is key terrain for the insurgency because its lines of communication to the northern areas of Kajaki and Musa Qala run directly through the district.

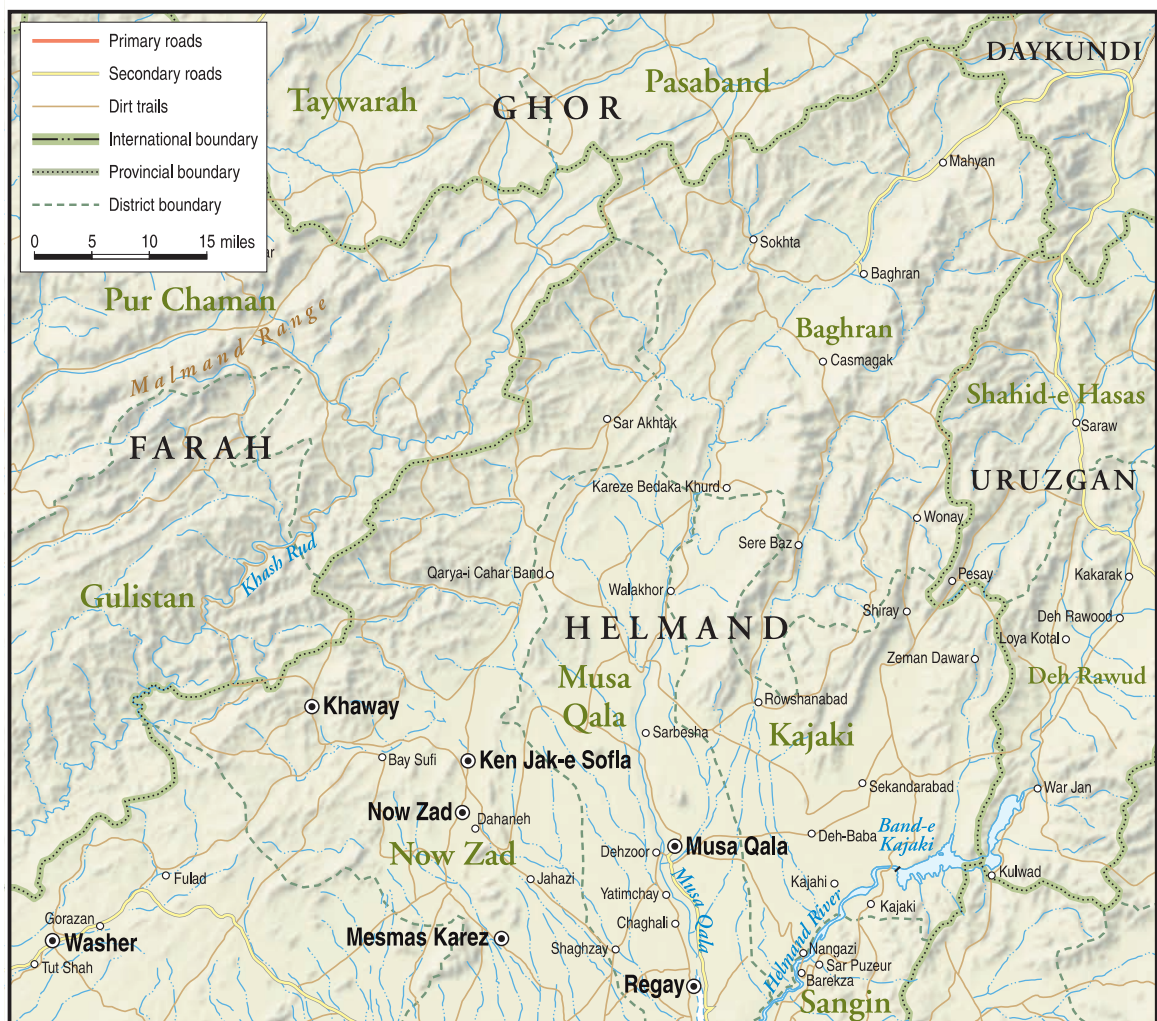
The Taliban have flourished in Sangin's insecurity. Taliban fighters probably began to move into

Sangin and Kajaki after they were driven out of Musa Qala district in December 2007.²³⁴ Once there, they set up shadow governance structures. Recently, one resident of Sangin stated that, “whenever we have a problem, we go to the Taliban and the Taliban court.”²³⁵ There are reports that “Taliban judges hold court after Friday prayers” in Sangin, providing residents with effective rule of law, a practice that helps them gain favor with locals. Elsewhere, the Taliban have reportedly set up checkpoints on major roadways, taxing trucks that use the highways.²³⁶ The Taliban’s taxation demonstrates their authority and control of the local populations.

Sangin district center is located just east of the Helmand River. The Taliban controls the green zone straddling both sides of the river. FOB Jack-

son is situated on the eastern edge of the Helmand River and houses a company of British troops as well as a company of U.S. Marines. Sangin district center lies on the main road running east from Jackson and is home to two patrol bases. However, unlike many districts in Helmand, most of Sangin’s population does not live in the district center. A road termed the Avenue of Hope connects the district center with Route 611, which runs north towards Kajaki. The majority of Sangin’s approximately 75,000 residents inhabit the farmland bordering Route 611, also the location for the district’s bazaar and market. The Afghan National Army is responsible for security in this area immediately to the north of Sangin district center.

The enemy in Sangin has been described as a



MAP 4 | NORTHERN HELMAND PROVINCE

“commuter insurgency,” where fighters enter Sangin to stage attacks and then retreat to their sanctuaries to the north and south along the green zone and east in Sarban Qala.²³⁷ The majority of enemy activity in the area is limited to harassing patrols and combat outposts in the area, either through the use of IEDs or ambush cells.²³⁸ Enemy ambushes are often launched using small arms fire on dismounted patrols.²³⁹ The enemy exploits the brush- and tree-lined terrain of the Sangin Valley in addition to the canals and channels that snake through the surrounding farming villages, knowing that the difficult terrain prohibits Afghan and coalition mounted patrols. The enemy rarely ambushes armored patrols, since they are often out-gunned and vulnerable to coalition air support. Instead, armored patrols are often targeted through the use of IEDs, in a tactic meant to dissuade UK forces from patrolling areas beyond “line of sight” of their outposts.²⁴⁰ The enemy does not suffer from a shortage of IEDs and other munitions, and it maintains numerous caches throughout the area in addition to IED manufacturing facilities in small village compounds, far from enemy patrols.²⁴¹

The area between Sangin and Kajaki to the north is the main area for the storing, processing, and transiting narcotics in northern Helmand. The Taliban provides the security conditions that allow the narcotics trade to flourish in the Sangin River Valley. The valley, stretching from Sangin to Kajaki is host to an expanse of farmland dedicated to poppy cultivation.²⁴² After the late-spring harvest season, opium is collected from the poppy plants and taken to any one of the numerous heroin refineries along the valley. In early 2009, British and Afghan forces seized more than \$80 million worth of narcotics in the Sarban Qala area of the Sangin River Valley.²⁴³ Sarban Qala, a Taliban-dominated village to the east of Sangin district center, is likely at the center of these operations.²⁴⁴ In June 2009, nearly five and a half tons of narcotics, over five tons of chemicals used in the process of refining raw opium into heroin, and twelve refining laboratories were discovered in the village.²⁴⁵

KAJAKI

Approximately thirty kilometers northeast of Sangin along the Helmand River Valley is the isolated town of Kajaki, the center of district of the same name. The district is best known for the massive Kajaki Dam complex, which is intended to feed the massive Helmand River from the Kajaki Reservoir and to provide electricity to a sizable portion of southern Afghanistan. The dam is surrounded by the Kajaki Mountains. The district center, which is home to the majority of Kajaki’s non-farming population, lies to the southwest of the dam in the flat valley on the edge of the Helmand River. Much of the district’s population is dispersed throughout a collection of small villages to the north and south of the dam complex.²⁴⁶

The Kajaki Dam has been a focal point for British operations in the area. In late August and early September 2008, British forces launched Operation *Tsuka* (Pashto for ‘Eagles Summit’) to transport over 200 tons of turbine and other machinery over one hundred miles of difficult terrain that stretches from Kandahar Airfield to the Kajaki Dam. Roughly 5,000 troops, one hundred vehicles, thirty helicopters and twenty fighter jets were involved in the operation.²⁴⁷ The convoy managed to make it to Kajaki after advance forces absorbed the majority of the Taliban’s attacks. The delivery and installation of the turbine, which would increase the capacity for electrical power for the people of southern Afghanistan, was part of a larger strategy aimed at improving Afghans’ quality of life through large-scale aid and development projects. It also sought to expand the reach of the Afghan government by extending basic services to outlying population centers. Progress on the dam project has been severely hampered by persistent security challenges in and around Kajaki.

Since 2008, British forces have maintained a company-plus force posture at FOB Zeebrugge, located on a hill overlooking the dam, in addition to occasional assistance from a contingent of Australian Special Forces. The primary objective of the force at Zeebrugge is to protect the dam and its immediate surroundings from Taliban attacks. The British have been limited in their ability to

establish security in and around Kajaki for two primary reasons: a lack of personnel and resources and terrain that unquestionably favors the Taliban and their operations in the area. Not only are there too few soldiers at Zeebrugge, the mountainous terrain surrounding the base is complex, preventing British forces from patrolling Kajaki's main population centers in the district's valley. The enemy's control of the battle-space surrounding FOB Zeebrugge offers it the freedom of movement to conduct coordinated ambushes and IED attacks largely at will.

Over the course of the fall 2008 and winter 2009, joint patrols in the area have frequently been the target of IEDs emplaced on the dirt roads and passes surrounding the dam and the district center.²⁴⁸ Occasionally, British forces and ANP have launched targeted raids on suspected militant compounds in and around the district center. In March and April 2009, joint forces killed nine militants in Kajaki along with a local Taliban commander by the name of Maulawi Hassan, who was reportedly responsible for "suicide attacks and bombings" in northern Helmand.²⁴⁹ Approximately one week later, while pursuing militants who ambushed a joint patrol in the area, coalition forces discovered an IED facility, complete with ready-made IED devices and other manufacturing materials.²⁵⁰ In addition to weapons and IED materials, compounds in Kajaki also contain narcotics, including "poppy seeds, raw opium and other drug paraphernalia."²⁵¹

The Taliban in Kajaki have instituted elements of a shadow government, providing judicial decisions and security enforcement around local villages. In Kajaki, it has been reported that "militants tax houses with electricity," according to a tribal elder in Sangin who goes by the name of Mohammad Aslam.²⁵² The taxes are likely used to finance the activities of local enemy cells, also demonstrating their control over the area and its residents.

NOW ZAD

Taliban operations in northern Helmand are not limited to the northeastern reaches of the Helmand River. Insurgents are also active in the

districts of northwestern Helmand. The district of Now Zad is sandwiched between Washer and Musa Qala. Now Zad's terrain is mostly flat, uninhabited desert while the northern part of the district, near the border with Farah province, is mountainous. The district center is located in a river valley, surrounded on all sides by mountainous terrain.

Between 2006 and 2007, thousands of residents fled the district center amid intense fighting between insurgents and British forces that were stationed on the town's outskirts.²⁵³ Since then, Taliban commanders and fighters have used the town for as a place for fighters to rest and reset.²⁵⁴ It is also one of several command and control hubs and a support node for the northern and central Helmand River Valley.²⁵⁵ Typically, insurgents have operated along several key lines on the outskirts of the city, while fighters have remained in the various bunker compounds and buildings throughout the northern part of the city, using ancient irrigation tunnels to maneuver throughout. On the eastern edge of town, militants reportedly have funneled weapons, fighters, and supplies through the tree-lined, dried-up wadi that runs south, close to FOB Naw Zad.²⁵⁶ Insurgents control the northern routes of the district center, the main one being Pakistani Alley, named several years ago for the "foreign fighters thought to man it."²⁵⁷

MUSA QALA

To the east of Now Zad lies the Musa Qala district. The district is home to the Musa Qala River, a tributary of the Helmand River that runs branches off to the north near Sangin. Unlike many other population centers in Helmand, the district center of Musa Qala is not located in the rich farming valley of the district. Instead, it is located several kilometers to the east, adjacent to a small tributary just east of the main river. The landscape surrounding the district center is relatively flat, aside from a towering mountain range to the northeast on the route to Baghran. Since early January of 2008, Afghan and coalition forces have been able to maintain a degree of stability in the district center, home to the local bazaar and a sizable popula-

tion of Pashtuns.²⁵⁸ Yet, they control little else.

Historically, the district has been one of the most unstable in all of Helmand. The British arrived in the small market town in 2006 and have battled the Taliban for control ever since. In 2006, British forces in Musa Qala consisted of a twenty-four man platoon that was based at a small outpost. The post earned the nickname, the Alamo, as it was constantly under enemy fire.²⁵⁹ After successive Taliban sieges that continually threatened to overrun the post, UK forces quietly arranged a deal between local tribal elders and the Afghan government to leave Musa Qala and turn the district's security over to a "self-policing...locally-raised Militia trained and equipped by the Government of Afghanistan."²⁶⁰ Yet, only months later, in February 2007, the village was overrun with Taliban fighters who seized the district center, routing the Afghan militia. The Taliban promised to protect poppy farms from government-led eradication efforts.²⁶¹

During the Taliban's reign in Musa Qala, it was reported that the area was transformed into a major narcotics hub, playing host to some fifty heroin refineries and opium stockpiles as large as eleven tons.²⁶² Furthermore, the enemy used the relatively flat expanse east of Musa Qala as a supply line to Kajaki and to launch ambush attacks on coalition forces patrolling the area surrounding the city and villages in the Sangin Valley.²⁶³ The villages of Deh-Baba and Shaghzay which lie approximately fifteen kilometers northwest of Kajaki were identified by coalition forces as the main insurgent strongholds along the lines of communication from Kajaki, Sangin, and Musa Qala.²⁶⁴

In mid-October 2007, ISAF forces mounted an offensive to retake the district center, after Mullah Abdul Salaam, a Pashtun from the Alizai tribe who had hitherto been an active, senior Taliban commander in the area, defected from the enemy.²⁶⁵ During the operation, dubbed Operation Snakebite, British, Afghan and U.S. forces slowly fought their way through entrenched Taliban defenses. They captured the district center in December, after a three-month assault involving a force of over 2,000.²⁶⁶ After Afghan and coalition forces

retook Musa Qala in December 2007, Salaam was named district governor, for his ability to work with the British. Since being named district governor, the former enemy commander has become the Taliban's primary target in Musa Qala, perhaps even more so than Afghan or coalition forces.

Taliban militants attacked the home of Mullah Salaam located in the small village of Shaghzay west of Kajaki on December 31, 2008.²⁶⁷ Twenty ANP who were serving as bodyguards for Salaam were killed. Salaam was away in Kabul at the time of the attack and was unharmed.²⁶⁸ The Taliban's shadow police chief for Helmand, Mullah Mohammad Qassim, claimed that one of the bodyguards was a Taliban sympathizer who had colluded in the ambush, although these reports are unconfirmed.²⁶⁹ Several months later, on February 4, 2009, a vehicle with six of Salaam's guards hit an IED as it passed through Musa Qala, killing all passengers.²⁷⁰ It is possible that Salaam's guards were the targets of both attacks, designed to frighten his other guards into cooperating with a Taliban assassination attempt on Salaam at a later date.

Since Operation Snakebite and the retaking of Musa Qala, the security situation in the district center has improved, if only slightly. Though ANP and coalition forces largely control the district center, the outlying areas immediately surrounding the center, such as Woqab, are essentially Taliban controlled.²⁷¹ Attacks on the district center are focused on ANP and UK forces patrolling the area. ANP forces patrolling in unarmored vehicles are a soft target for enemy suicide bombers and IED placement cells.²⁷² UK forces on foot patrols within the district center have also been targeted, albeit less frequently, usually with IEDs or small-arms ambushes.²⁷³ Since 2007, the Taliban have not sought to recapture the district center. Instead, they have carried out limited attacks in and around the main market, the most populated area in the district center. These attacks demonstrate the Taliban's ability to disrupt the relative calm in the district center and the location of their choosing, perpetuating resident's uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of ANP and coalition forces efforts.

The majority of enemy activity occurs to the south and north of Musa Qala district center in Taliban controlled villages. To the south, enemy activity has been reported as far as Chaghali village, approximately twenty kilometers south of the district center, near the enemy-controlled areas of Yatimchay and Dehzoor. To the north, the enemy has planted numerous home-made IEDs on roads frequented by joint patrols, while taking advantage of the landscape's myriad mud-walled compounds to launch ambushes on passing patrols with small arms, machine guns and RPGs.²⁷⁴

By all available indicators Musa Qala has continued to serve as the major narcotics hub in north-western Helmand, home to a criminal-narcotics element that operates in and around the district center and bazaar.²⁷⁵ On May 12, 2009, combined forces executed a search of a suspected militant's home, discovering 1,000 pounds of raw, black-tar opium. Additionally, a "suspected drug trafficker...believed to have ties with people who use the proceeds from the sale of drugs to finance insurgent activities," was arrested along with an armed accomplice.²⁷⁶ Raw opium is collected from poppy farmers situated along the Musa Qala River, from the northernmost point in Sarbeshah to southern Regay, a suspected narcotics center for the upper Helmand River Valley.²⁷⁷ The area between Yatimchay and Regay, an approximately fifteen kilometer stretch of the Musa Qala River Valley is essentially Taliban-controlled, and virtually uncontrolled by Afghan or coalition forces.

BAGHRAN

Nearly one-hundred kilometers north along the Musa Qala River is the mountainous Baghran district, the northernmost point in Helmand. The district of Baghran is almost entirely comprised of mountain ranges, flanked on the western half of the district by the Musa Qala River Valley. The valley is home to the majority of Baghran's population, who mainly live in the district center. Baghran is one of the five districts identified by the Afghan government in June 2009 as having no government presence.²⁷⁸

For some time, the Taliban has operated in the

mountainous regions and narrow valleys of the district. In August 2007, a precision air strike targeted a large gathering of Taliban, killing several top Taliban commanders, including Mullah Dadullah Mansur, in the village of Qaleh Chah, approximately twenty-five kilometers south of the district center.²⁷⁹ The gathering was organized to carry out a public execution of two "spies" at the Ibrahim Shah Baba shrine. The air strike resulted in civilian deaths, although it was estimated that a sizable number of Taliban fighters were eliminated in the strike.

While Baghran was likely a Taliban stronghold long before August 2007, the enemy presence in the area after December 2007 increased after the Taliban were routed from Musa Qala.²⁸⁰ Both Musa Qala and Baghran are dominated by the Alizai tribe, the same tribe of Mullah Salaam, the former Taliban commander that was appointed district governor of Musa Qala in January of 2008. In fact, there is a long history of Mujahideen—and now Taliban—dominance of the areas around Musa Qala, Sangin, Kajaki and Baghran that dates back to Mullah Nasim Akhundzadeh's consolidation of power in the area during the late 1970s—early 1980s.²⁸¹ Years later, the Akhundzadeh clan essentially ceded the area to the Taliban. Ultimately, the Taliban gained control of the area in 1995 and named Baghran as their capital or center of power in Helmand.²⁸²

Since August 2007, Afghan and coalition forces have rarely ventured into Baghran, only occasionally launching targeted air strikes with relatively little success.²⁸³ In April 2009, it was reported that the family of a former Taliban commander was killed in a targeted ISAF air strike.²⁸⁴ Mullah Abdul Wahid, known as Rais-e Baghran was suspected of maintaining strong links with Taliban fighters in the area, although he now resides in Kabul, "in limbo between the government and the Taliban."²⁸⁵ Baghran, an Alizai Pashtun, is described as one of the most influential figures in Helmand.²⁸⁶ Although he was the intended target of the strike, he was not in the car at the time. However, the death of his son and wife is a major setback for U.S. and coalition attempt to win hearts and minds not just of the Baghran dis-

tribe but the entire Alizais tribe. Given Baghran's relative isolation from the enemy system's center of gravity and the size and scope of the enemy entrenchment along the Helmand River, it is doubtful that Baghran plays a critical role in current Taliban operations in Helmand.²⁸⁷

HELMAND'S LINKS TO KANDAHAR AND URUZGAN

Compared to the number of IED incidents that have occurred in Helmand province, the size of IED manufacturing operations and the quantity of munitions found along the Helmand River suggests that Helmand serves as support zone for Taliban attacks in neighboring provinces, particularly Uruzgan and Kandahar.

The tri-border area between Helmand, Uruzgan, and Kandahar is a virtually off-limits for Afghan and coalition forces. The Helmand districts of Sangin and Kajaki, the district of Deh Rawood in Uruzgan, and districts of Nesh and Ghorak in Kandahar effectively constitute the majority of enemy-dominated terrain in the tri-border area. According to Brigadier General John W. Nicholson, deputy commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan, little is known about enemy activity in Ghorak and Nesh, aside from the fact that a presence of NATO troops is "minimal or nil."²⁸⁸

Kajaki and parts of Sangin serve as a safe-haven for fighters "moving between Helmand and Uruzgan province."²⁸⁹ The southwestern portion of Shahidi Hassas and much of the Deh Rawood district in Uruzgan are Taliban strongholds, in part due to the mountainous terrain and minimal ISAF force presence but also because of the Taliban's historical familiarity with the area and control of the border area in Helmand. In October 2008, the Taliban in Deh Rawood launched a mass infantry attack on the district center, totaling more than one hundred fighters by some accounts.²⁹⁰ While Afghan Police and coalition forces managed to repel the attack with the help of air support, it was seen as an indicator of the Taliban's strong presence in the area.

The ISAF presence in Uruzgan falls under the command of the Dutch-led Task Force Uruzgan, which is based out of Camp Holland in the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt. Since September of 2008, the Dutch and Australians have maintained a troop presence of over 2,000 troops, but they have only established security in approximately ten to fifteen percent of the province at any given time.²⁹¹ Portions of that force are deployed to FOBs Tycz and Hadrian, southeast of Deh Rawood. While most military personnel agree that Uruzgan has not been a major focus of Taliban offensive operations, it is likely that the area between Baghran, Kajaki, Deh Rawood supports operations in northern Helmand sees the flow of fighters and weapons along the Helmand River to Shahidi Hassas and east to Tarin Kowt.

Ghorak has been described by ISAF forces as a "jet stream" for Taliban fighters, flowing through to Kandahar but possibly to Sangin and even Gereshk if needed.²⁹² In January 2009, an ISAF airstrike in the vicinity of Ghorak killed the prominent insurgent, Haji Adam, reportedly involved in the "movement of fighters, IED production, and in the planning and execution of attacks... also engaged in the illegal narcotics trade in the Sangin area."²⁹³ Adam was reportedly connected to another senior leader in Helmand, Akhter Muhammad Mansur (Mullah Mansur), thought to be one the most senior Taliban military commanders in Helmand, who focused on attacks in the Lashkar Gah and Gereshk areas.²⁹⁴ This suggests that the linkages in the enemy system operat-



MAP 5 | GHORAK DISTRICT

ing in and around Lashkar Gah and Gereshk may be supported, or at the very least, connected with elements in Sangin, Now Zad, Ghorak and the Taliban stronghold of Maiwand in Kandahar.

Indeed, details of recent operations by Australian Special forces targeting senior QST commanders further support the tri-border thesis. One of these commanders was believed to be Mullah Abdul Bari, killed by Australian Special Forces (SOTG- Special Air Service) in the area between Musa Qala and Kajaki. Bari was a senior commander and former governor of Helmand during the Taliban regime, thought to be responsible for the kidnapping of the Governor of Uruzgan's spokesman in the spring of 2007 and a spate of other attacks in both Helmand and Uruzgan.²⁹⁵ In January 2009, SOTG operatives killed Mullah Abdul Rasheed, a senior Baluchi Valley Taliban commander, identified as "having organized the importation of foreign fighters," likely from the Helmand River Valley that stretches into Uruzgan, virtually unmonitored by ISAF forces in the area, with the exception of the SOTG.²⁹⁶ Of these commanders, the senior commander Bari and the



PHOTO 4 | BRITISH ROYAL MARINES IN NAD ALI DISTRICT. (ISAF PHOTO)

less senior commander Rasheed have established relationships with other former Mujahideen fighters in Helmand and Uruzgan, now serving as field commanders for the QST. While these commanders have been eliminated by SOTG, they highlight the importance of the Helmand River enemy system functioning in support of Taliban operations across provincial lines.

THE BRITISH EXPERIENCE IN HELMAND

In May 2006, Secretary of State for Defence John Reid announced that a UK-led headquarters would assume responsibility for expanded international military efforts into the south of Afghanistan, namely Helmand.²⁹⁷ The UK's planning for the Helmand mission began in 2005 and stressed a "comprehensive approach," involving elements of the Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO), Ministry of Defence, and the Department for International Development (DFID).²⁹⁸ This approach was intended to mirror the UK's "Malayan ink-spot strategy," a counter-insurgency approach practiced some fifty years ago in Malaya.²⁹⁹ By focusing on the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, the hope was that successful implementation of a comprehensive approach towards improving security, political, social and economic aspects of life in the capital would spread such stability to outlying towns and villages.³⁰⁰

Planners in the UK presented the mission primarily as a "peace support and counter-narcotics mission," rather than a counterinsurgency campaign.³⁰¹ Yet, the situation on the ground in Helmand was far worse than was believed. In an effort to adjust, the British adopted a "platoon house strategy," with British forces dispersed in small outposts throughout the province.³⁰² In May 2009, Foreign Office Minister Lord Malloch-Brown admitted, "the strength of the insurgent opposition we have faced in Helmand has surprised us; there is no way around that."³⁰³ Because they were dispersed in insufficient numbers, these outposts were frequently and quickly overwhelmed by insurgent forces.³⁰⁴

The UK sought to clarify the country's role in Helmand amidst increasing claims from Parlia-

ment of a disjointed and disorganized mission set in December 2007.³⁰⁵ It laid out a series of objectives that were geared primarily towards counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, governance and development.³⁰⁶ The UK was also looking to “transition away from a ground combat role to security sector reform.”³⁰⁷ Months later, the British Prime Minister announced his Government’s “strategic principles” for the UK mission in Afghanistan.³⁰⁸ These principles were the means by which the UK would achieve their objectives. These principles included: supporting the Afghan government, the ANA, and the police so that they could take responsibility for their own security; building state and local institutions; fostering political reconciliation; and conducting reconstruction and development.³⁰⁹ Despite a clarification of objectives and principles, the security situation in the province worsened.

Task Force Helmand constitutes the Civil-Military Mission in Helmand (CMMH), the umbrella organization coordinating the UK’s comprehensive approach; Task Force Helmand operates under the lead of the FCO, the DFID, and the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT).³¹⁰ The FCO is based out of a large compound in the center of Lashkar Gah.³¹¹ In late 2008, FCO personnel were focused on several ongoing “zones of development” in “Lashkar Gah, Sangin, Musa Qala, Gereshk and Garmser” and months later, in Nad Ali.³¹² Yet, the effort has been hampered by a lack of integration and coordination of aims and means. Development personnel have been reluctant to partner with the counterinsurgency component of the comprehensive approach.³¹³ In July 2009, senior British Army officers voiced their frustration with the civil element of the CMMH, stating, “no one in their right mind would ignore the importance of reconstruction in Afghanistan. But you must have security to have reconstruction and governance, and we don’t think the FCO and DFID have quite got the equation right. We need more troops to ensure they can do their job.”³¹⁴ Yet, Parliament voiced concern that there was “too much kinetic activity going on...they needed to see the evidence of reconstruction and development... that is what the government has presented to the British people.”³¹⁵ The intended benefits of

reconstruction were lost on a population that did not have security.

In Musa Qala, development and reconstruction have been hampered by corruption, mismanagement and most of all, persistent insecurity. The UK’s Stabilization Advisor in Musa Qala, Col. Justin Holt stated in the summer of 2008 that after eight months of operating in the district, “there hasn’t been much visible progress.”³¹⁶ Misuse of funds through subcontracting, bribery, and deliberate Afghan inflation of costs are just some of the many problems that have plagued the UK’s effort.³¹⁷ Furthermore, the Taliban’s control of the roads surrounding the district has prevented supplies from arriving. Although as the British have successfully built roads and refurbished schools and local government buildings, they are frequent targets of Taliban attacks. In nearly all of the “zones of development” districts, the coalition and Afghan forces control the district center while large swaths of the surrounding area essentially have been ceded to the Taliban.³¹⁸

An April 2009 report entitled “UK Policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Way Forward” outlined the UK’s commitment to their “counterinsurgency” strategy, focusing on Lashkar Gah and the district centers of Garmser, Gereshk, Musa Qala, Sangin and Nad Ali.³¹⁹ However, their comprehensive, civil-military counterinsurgency effort was not achieving substantive results. A July 2009 report from the British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee concluded that “the security situation [in Helmand] is preventing any strengthening of governance and Afghan capacity” and that the “security situation makes it extremely difficult for civilians to move around the province, and as a result civilian projects suffer.”³²⁰ In short, to stabilize the province and improve security, the British forces needed to focus on combating the insurgency.

OPERATION PANTHER’S CLAW

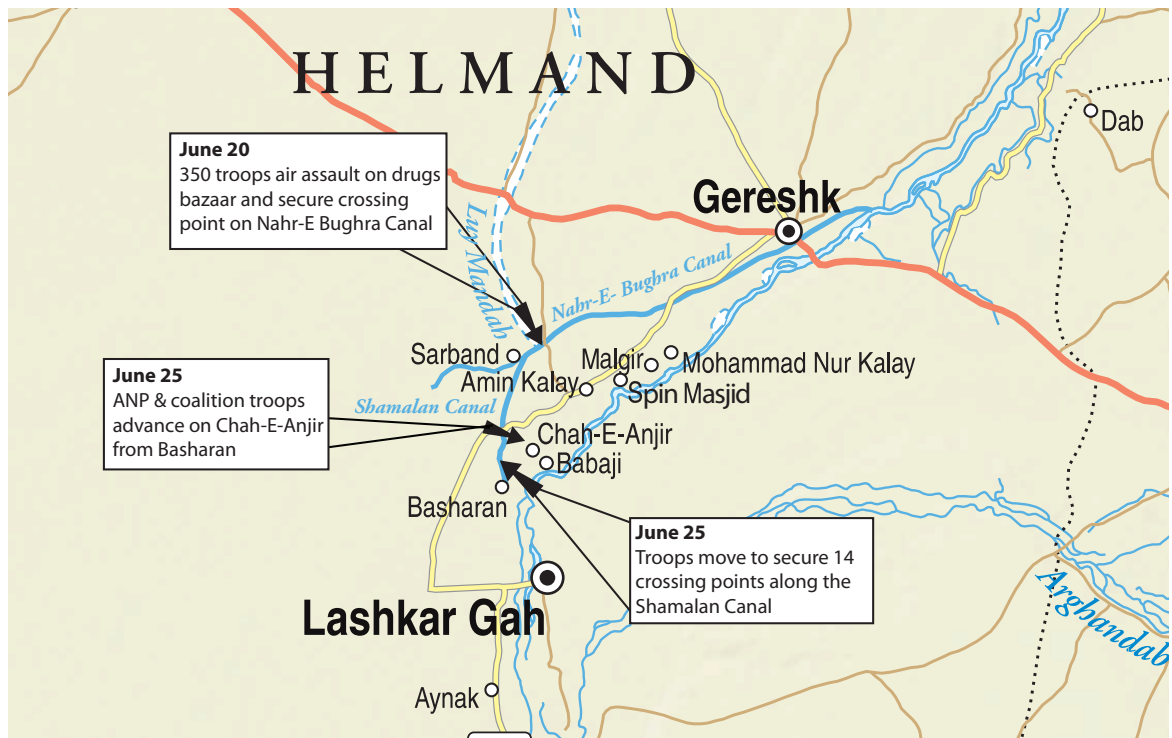
In June 2009, British forces launched their largest operation to date in Helmand province, which involved over 3,000 British, Danish, Estonian and Afghan forces supported by a wide range of

air assets.³²¹ Operation Panther's Claw (Operation *Panchai Palang* in Pashto) was designed "to clear and hold one of the few remaining Taliban strongholds... the end result will provide lasting security for the local population," according to Lt. Col. Nick Richardson, spokesman for the British forces in Helmand.³²² The operation sought to clear and hold a triangular piece of terrain between Lashkar Gah and Gereshk, a portion of Helmand's green zone, in order to allow the local population to vote in the August 20, 2009 elections. This particular piece of terrain runs south from Gereshk between the Helmand River and Nahr-e-Bughra canal; its southern border is formed by the Shamalan canal, northwest of Babaji. The terrain has been under Taliban control for years, serving as the key corridor for their operations along the Helmand River.

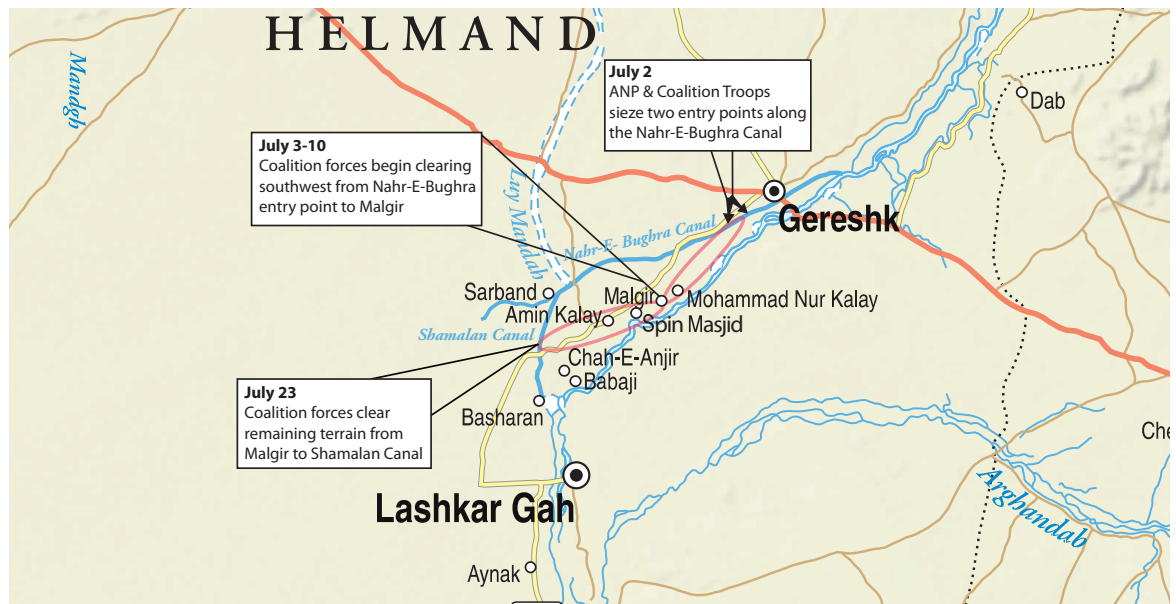
The initial phase of the operation began the morning of June 20, 2009, when 350 troops conducted an air assault to secure a vital crossing point into the green zone. The seizure of the crossing point allowed for a direct assault on an insurgent-controlled drugs bazaar. The bazaar was located just to the east of the intersection of

the Luy Manda wadi and Nahr-E-Bughra canal. A string of enemy IEDs set to obstruct coalition freedom of movement required the assault force to air-lift into their target area.³²³ British forces lacked a sufficient supply of Chinook helicopters for the airlift and had to borrow six U.S. helicopters.³²⁴ Despite efforts to conceal their advance, enemy fighters learned of the British approach and fired on the force as they landed. The remaining force moved in from the north in armored vehicles to link-up with the air assault force that was consolidating their position.³²⁵ The enemy assaulted British positions with anti-aircraft, small arms, and RPG fire that continued throughout the operation, although to a lesser degree.³²⁶ Apparently, the area's residents were also aware of the impending assault. Just days before the launch of the operation, drones monitoring the town recorded scores of residents fleeing the town, likely seeking refuge amongst other internally displaced persons to the north in Gereshk or south in Lashkar Gah.

British and ANA forces ultimately aimed to secure the bazaar in Babaji further to the south, the main objective of the Panther's Claw "triangle."³²⁷ The



MAP 6 | PHASE 1 OF OPERATION PANTHER'S CLAW



MAP 7 | PHASE 2 OF OPERATION PANTHER'S CLAW

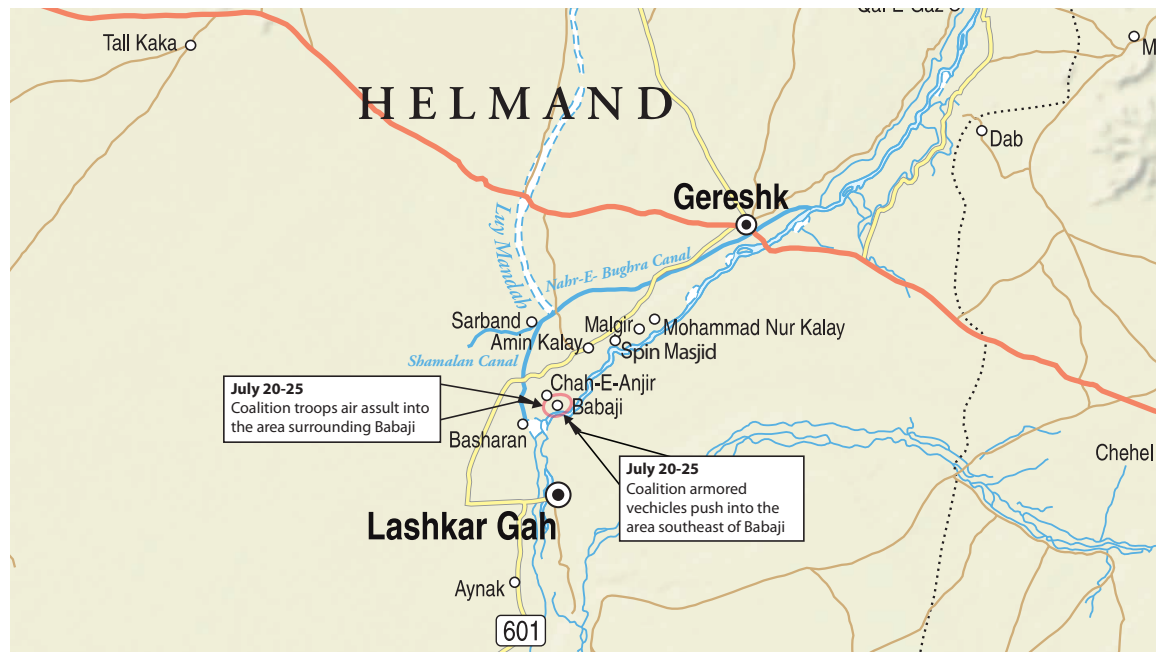
bazaar was a known enemy logistics and financing node, though it was located only a mile northeast of the reportedly secure town of Basharan.³²⁸ The British faced relatively modest resistance as they advanced towards the bazaar. They soon discovered that the entire area had been abandoned.³²⁹ The troops only came in contact with two locals—a boy selling bread and an elderly man who was too sick to leave with the rest of the residents.³³⁰ Within days, the majority of the British force returned to Camp Bastion, leaving a small force in place to hold their outpost near the bazaar.³³¹

The ANP, assisted by a company of British forces, began to move north from Basharan towards the enemy-held town of Chah-E-Anjir on June 25, 2009.³³² Although the Afghan and British force was able to seize the town without much resistance, the enemy returned to probe the force's outer defenses.³³³ In doing so, the Taliban seemed to rely most heavily on laying IEDs rather than engaging the force in conventional battle. Still, they inflicted numerous casualties on Taliban fighters who mounted several attacks on their positions.³³⁴

Meanwhile, British troops began an operation to seize thirteen crossing points across the Shamalan canal, which effectively constituted the western perimeter of Operation Panther's Claw.³³⁵ The move was designed to trap insurgents in the green

zone and prevent enemy reinforcements flowing in from Nad Ali, to the southwest, as the canal flows down from the Nahr-E-Bughra, effectively separating Nad Ali from the remainder of the green zone to the northeast.³³⁶ It was here that the Taliban staged their fiercest defense. It was reported that a platoon of thirty soldiers suffered nineteen casualties.³³⁷ Throughout the remainder of June, forces around Babaji, the Shamalan and Nahr-E-Bughra canals consolidated and held their positions in until the launch of the second phase of the operation in early July.

On July 2, 2009, the second phase of the operation commenced.³³⁸ Danish and ANP forces moved south from Camp Price near Gereshk to seize two entry crossings along the Nahr-E-Bughra canal. The area is important terrain for the insurgency because of its dense vegetation and various irrigation ditches, which provide ample concealment to facilitate the movement of fighters, drugs and weapons north and south. Additionally, there are only a handful of access points into the area, which have been heavily mined with IEDs to deter regular patrolling by Coalition and Afghan forces. In the months leading up to Panther's Claw, insurgents in the green zone denied the Danish forces access to the area through the use of strategically placed IEDs and small arms fire.³³⁹ Eventually, the Danish force secured the northern edge of



MAP 8 | PHASE 3 OF OPERATION PANTHER'S CLAW

the Panther's Claw and they began to move south into the heart of the green zone.³⁴⁰

The remainder of phase two was designed to clear some of the most difficult terrain in the green zone. British forces moved to enter the green zone and began to push southwest towards the Shamalan canal.³⁴¹ While their progress was slowed by the enemy's placement of IEDs that resulted in several casualties, the forces pushed on, eventually clearing the villages of Spin Masjid and Malgir.³⁴² At Spin Masjid, the assault force of approximately 400 faced fierce enemy resistance. On July 10, 2009, British forces were ordered to "pause" in Malgir to recuperate and resupply before continuing west, while another contingent conducted two separate air assaults west of the British advance to "confuse the Taliban" before the main clearing force was set to arrive.³⁴³ The advance was slowed by numerous IEDs. According to reports from the field, "objectives that were meant to have been overwhelmed in an hour took more than a day to seize."³⁴⁴ Despite operating in Helmand since 2006, the British had never ventured into this area of the green zone and their intelligence preparation of the battlefield was poor.

Through the end of July, British forces maneuvered down through the area of the green zone to

clear the remainder of the terrain from Malgir to the Shamalan canal.³⁴⁵ By July 23, 2009, the force reported to have cleared ninety-two compounds and the remainder of the twelve kilometers of green zone between Lashkar Gah and Gereshk.³⁴⁶

The final phase of Panther's Claw was designed to capture key terrain surrounding Babaji. British troops air assaulted behind enemy lines while sixty armored vehicles pushed into the area southeast of Babaji from July 20-25, 2009.³⁴⁷ As the force moved to clear some of the remaining areas around the village, it became clear that the Taliban were not going to openly confront the force, as they went to ground.³⁴⁸

The British commander of Task Force Helmand declared the operation a success on July 27, 2009.³⁴⁹ Yet, enemy IED cells were still seen operating in the area, while other insurgents were reported to have disappeared into the green zone.³⁵⁰ During the course of the operation, estimates suggested that 200-300 insurgents were killed out of the estimated 500 that were thought to be operating in the area.³⁵¹ The majority of the force did not remain in the green zone after the conclusion of the clearing phase on July 27.³⁵² British and Scottish forces and a contingent of ANSF have remained in the green zone to hold

the area between Malgir and Babaji.³⁵³ According to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “security [in and around Babaji] will be enduring. It will be there next week. It will be there next month. It will be there next year.”³⁵⁴

The timing of the operation was, in part, designed to provide a safe security environment for some 80,000 eligible voters to go to the polls and cast their ballots on August 20, 2009, in the national elections. However, based on early estimates from the BBC, approximately 150 turned out to vote in Babaji, the only area in the green zone safe enough to open a polling station.³⁵⁵ At least five coalition troops have been killed in the area since the operation was declared a success.³⁵⁶

The shortcomings of Panther’s Claw were evident. First, the force failed to comprehensively and methodically clear the green zone. Hence, the transition to the holding phase was premature. An insufficient holding force has been left to oppose an enemy presence that is still quite strong. The poor voter turnout was likely a result of an enemy presence that remains capable of intimidating and coercing the local population. Although the British may hold Babaji district center, the remainder of the green zone is not under their control. Despite the magnitude of Panther’s Claw, the result is likely to be the same as previous operations throughout Helmand.

OPERATION KHANJAR

With the British-led operation designed to secure the areas north of Lashkar Gah, U.S. Marines in Helmand launched Operation *Khanjar*, “Strike of the Sword,” in the early morning hours of July 2, 2009. *Khanjar* involved over 4,000 newly-arrived Marines from the Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan (MEB-A) and approximately 600 ANA and ANP.³⁵⁷ *Khanjar* was the largest operation undertaken in Afghanistan since the initial invasion in 2001. The objective was to establish a security presence in Taliban-controlled territory south of Helmand’s provincial capital ahead of the August 20, 2009 election and to disrupt the Taliban’s lines of communication and freedom of movement.³⁵⁸ According to Brigadier General

Larry Nicholson, the commander of the MEB-A, “where we go we will stay, and where we stay, we will hold, build and work toward transition of all security responsibilities to Afghan forces.”³⁵⁹

During the early morning hours of July 2, 2009, a Marine battalion was airlifted into the district of Nawa, behind enemy lines to take up a position in a field outside the district center.³⁶⁰ Similarly, a second Marine battalion arrived south of Garmser district center in Mian Poshteh to reinforce a company of U.S. Marines who had been conducting shaping operations in the area for nearly two months, ahead of the main assault.³⁶¹ A final battalion of Marines moved into the Taliban-controlled district of Khan Neshin, the southern anchor of the Helmand River’s “fishhook.” In Nawa, the assault force faced relatively little resistance as they progressed through the district.³⁶² During the initial hours of the operation, Marines made contact with a group of twenty insurgents, who fired on their position from a compound. The insurgents were able to escape after Marines decided not to engage for fear of civilian casualties.³⁶³ The day after arriving in the district, the Marines began aggressively patrolling to draw out any remaining insurgents and to engage with local residents.³⁶⁴ They slowly expanded their patrolling to the south in order clear ground in northern Garmser.³⁶⁵

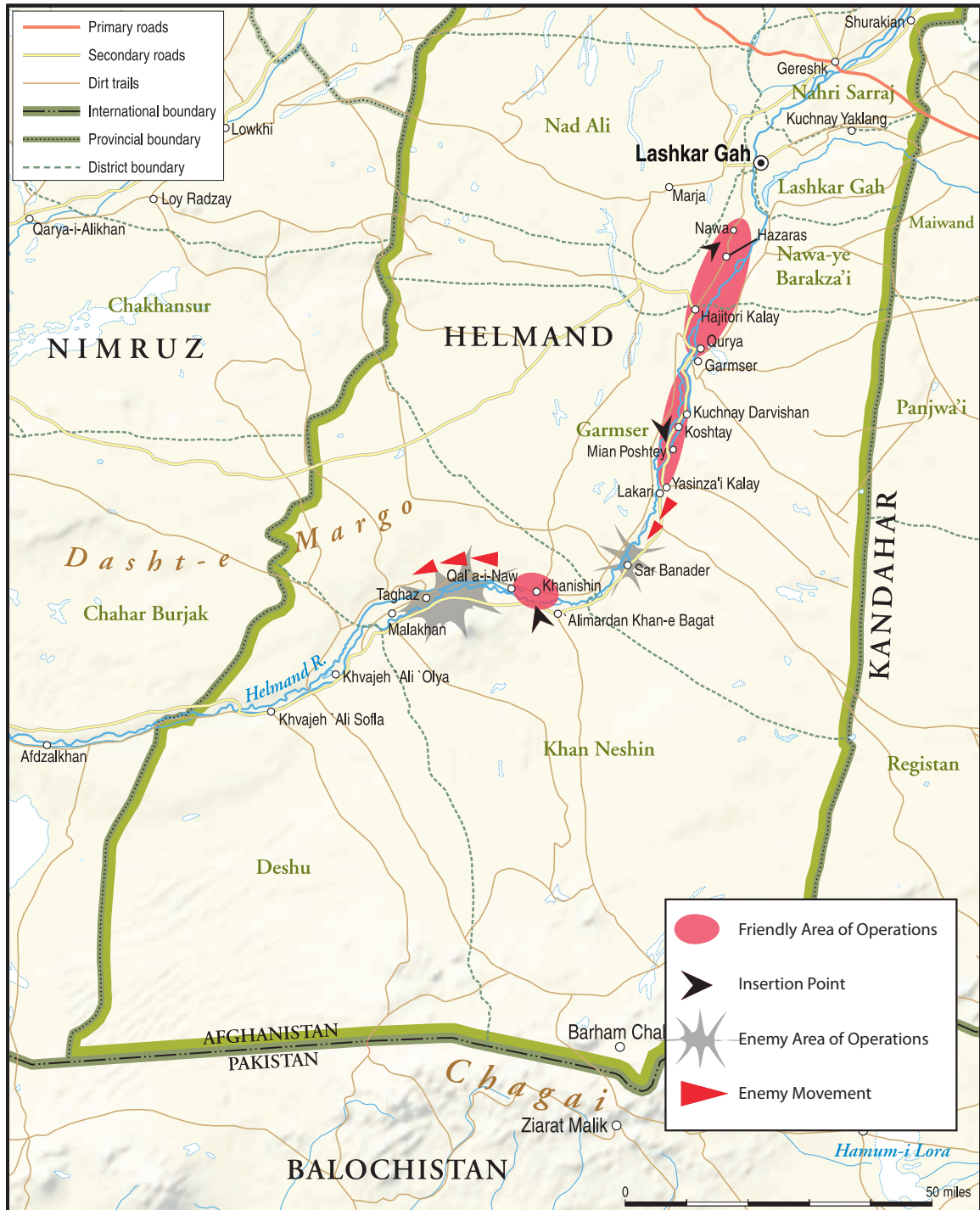
To the south in Garmser, the majority of the Marines’ efforts focused on several small villages, beginning with the initial insertion in Mian Poshteh. Mian Poshteh saw some of the fiercest enemy resistance of the operation. The Marines reported the enemy conducting “feint attack[s] from one compass direction, then firing from a second direction, and followed up with a proper attack from a third [direction].”³⁶⁶

Beyond Mian Poshteh, the village of Koshtay was identified as an insurgent stronghold, despite being just miles from the district center of Garmser.³⁶⁷ After breaking through the Taliban’s southern defensive line below Garmser, the Marines pushed further south to Lakari and established combat outposts in key enemy territory.³⁶⁸ According to the Marines, the ANP in Garmser have

systematically refused to operate in villages just south of the town such as Mian Poshteh, Koshtay and Lakari for fear of the Taliban.³⁶⁹

Although the force faced relatively little resistance from Taliban fighters as they moved south, the enemy was still able to operate in the area. Taliban

IED teams reportedly boxed-in Marine elements operating in outlying areas south of Garmser, filling in “dirt roads behind and around them with bombs.”³⁷⁰ Once the Marines realized what was happening, they reassigned valuable manpower to maintain constant surveillance of key transit points.³⁷¹ The efficacy of the Taliban’s IED opera-



MAP 9 | OPERATION KHANJAR

tions has forced many Marines to walk rather than drive, taking circuitous routes and slowing the pace of their operations.³⁷² As a consequence, the operations failed to achieve the intended element of surprise.

U.S. and NATO forces acknowledged that some Taliban “fled Helmand ahead of the Marines,” while others reportedly escaped during the offensive.³⁷³ In Khan Neshin, Taliban could easily have fled to any number of villages to west and possibly into neighboring Nimruz. Between Khan Neshin and Garmser, the Taliban have largely been able to disperse and hide in the myriad of villages, too numerous for the Marines to patrol. Historically, the Taliban’s modus operandi has been to retreat; to rely on asymmetric tactics such as IEDs and indirect fire; and to only engage coalition forces when trapped or able to execute a coordinated ambush on a small patrol. On numerous occasions, senior commanders denied Marines requests to pursue Taliban fighters south of Lakari due to a “lack of helicopters to provide air power and to evacuate any possible casualties, as well as roads that had not been cleared of bombs.”³⁷⁴ In all likelihood, the majority of Taliban fighters never left the Helmand River.

In the southern Khan Neshin district, the Marines had considerably more success. Khan Neshin is the southernmost point for Taliban operations along the Helmand River.³⁷⁵ For years, the Taliban have operated out of the district’s ancient Jugroom Fort complex with impunity. On July 2, 2009, approximately 500 Marines arrived by vehicle in the town.³⁷⁶ Just days after arriving in the district, the Marines were able to seize the fort and the surrounding areas with minimal resistance. The force dispatched a “stabilization team,” installed a newly appointed district governor, and enabled Helmand’s governor to raise the Afghan flag in the district center on July 8, 2009.³⁷⁷

Despite some success, Operation *Khanjar* was plagued by a shortage of manpower. U.S. and Afghan forces were thinly spread across Taliban-controlled terrain, in spite of the more than 4,500 personnel participating in the operation. As such, they were unable to maintain a constant

presence in some of the smaller villages between Garmser district center and Khan Neshin.³⁷⁸ According to Brig. Gen. Nicholson, the shortage of Afghan forces [particularly ANA] has been particularly problematic, as they “understand intuitively what’s going on in an area that we’ll just never get... they can see guys on the street, and they can tell you that this guy’s not a local, that he’s not even an Afghan.”³⁷⁹ Furthermore, among the approximately 500 ANSF personnel that are participating in *Khanjar*, issues of corruption, illiteracy, refusal to patrol and lack of interaction with the local populations have been reported, despite the presence of the ANA 205th Corp, 3rd Brigade operating out of Helmand.³⁸⁰ The lack of sufficient and capable Afghan forces have allowed the Taliban to consolidate their operations in some of the smaller villages between Garmser and Khan Neshin, forcing the Marines to either cede territory or risk spreading their force too thin.³⁸¹ Throughout mid to late August, the Marines began “going-firm,” consolidating their positions and constructing fortifications from which to operate. The Marines constructed a patrol base and combat outpost south of Garmser district center, including semi-permanent overwatch positions to scan for enemy activity.³⁸²

Much like Panther’s Claw to the north, *Khanjar* was timed to provide sufficient security for Afghans to vote in the elections. Polling stations were opened in the district centers of Khan Neshin and Garmser, but not in the eighty kilometer stretch of the “fishhook” in-between.³⁸³ In Garmser, the main polling station was opened in the “Snake’s Head,” a small area of terrain at the northern end of the district.³⁸⁴ Several other smaller polling stations were opened in other parts of the district where the Taliban hold more sway. Estimates suggest that less than five percent of the district’s approximately 80,000 residents turned out to vote, amidst Taliban threats and “night letters” distributed throughout the area.³⁸⁵ Over the course of the day, not a single woman was reported to have cast a ballot.

The Marines are still in the clearing phase in many areas throughout the southern Helmand River. That task is the responsibility of Lt. Col. Mathew

Kolich, commander of Regimental Combat Team 3, responsible for southern Helmand. The enemy in Mian Poshteh is particularly resistant and continues to engage the Marines on a daily basis.³⁸⁶ In the near term, the Marines will continue to pursue the enemy in the southern Helmand River. More importantly, they appear to have sufficient forces to hold an area once it is properly cleared. General McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, recently stated that clearing without holding is “ineffectual” and “counter-productive.”³⁸⁷

The Marines are seeing some positive results. In early September, the Marines noticed that locals have become more cooperative and forthcoming with information and have even captured Taliban fighters and turned them over to ANSF personnel.³⁸⁸ The Marines also report that their freedom of movement has improved significantly in recent weeks.³⁸⁹ In some areas, the security situation has improved to such an extent that reconstruction projects are beginning. In Garmser, the Marines, the district governor and local Afghans have begun project Saraban Sluice Gate, a re-routing of the Helmand River to maximize local farmers’ access to water for irrigation.³⁹⁰

OPERATION EASTERN RESOLVE II

In the Now Zad district of northern Helmand, a company of Marines have battled the Taliban in the abandoned district center since June 2008, when they were originally sent to train the district’s police force.³⁹¹ When the Marines arrived, they discovered that the district’s residents had fled, that the Taliban had taken over, and that the police were gone. The Marines operated from a base on a paved road, just outside of the district center and maintained a rear base on “ANP Hill” just to the south, named after the police that were supposed to be operating in the district.³⁹²

In October 2008, the Marines launched an operation to drive the Taliban out of the district center. The operation, though hard fought, successfully pushed the insurgents out a several kilometers to the north.³⁹³ The Marines were

shorthanded, however, and they could not hold the area they had just cleared. Shortly after they returned to base, the insurgents returned.³⁹⁴ In November 2008, Fox Company of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Regiment (2/7) Marines were replaced by the 3rd Battalion, 8th Regiment (3/8) Marines. Their experience would closely mirror that of Fox Company. The reinforced company patrolled the town on a regularly basis, doing their best to avoid the mines and IEDs scattered throughout the district.

On April 3, 2009, the reinforced company of the 3/8 Marines launched Operation Eastern Resolve I. Prior to the launch of the operation, Marines conducted combat operations to shape the operation and identify disposable enemy positions.³⁹⁵ The operation was designed to target those enemy positions, disrupting enemy operations in the area prior to their annual spring offensive. The commanding officer of the Marine company deemed the operation a success, but it was unclear what had been achieved. The Marines still did not have enough forces to hold Now Zad district center or the surrounding villages that housed the towns displaced residents. Around this same time, the Marines in Now Zad requested approximately 1,000 troops, not only to clear the Taliban from the district, but to hold the cleared ground and allow Now Zad’s residents to return.³⁹⁶ The request was denied, and the effects of Eastern Resolve I were short lived.³⁹⁷

During the night of August 11, 2009, approximately 400 Marines and one hundred ANA launched Operation Eastern Resolve II.³⁹⁸ The main objective was the village of Dahaneh, the main economic center of Now Zad only miles south of the Marines’ operating base on the outskirts of the district center. The town had been a stronghold for the Taliban, which they used both to control the Now Zad valley and operate a major opium market in the town’s bazaar.³⁹⁹ Furthermore, the operation was executed before the August elections so that the town’s 2,000 residents would be able to vote.

The Marines managed to seize roughly half the town by August 13, 2009, but only after fierce



MAP 10 | OPERATION EASTERN RESOLVE II

enemy resistance.⁴⁰⁰ Enemy fighters were reported fleeing to the mountains surrounding the town, firing on the Marines as they advanced.⁴⁰¹ Over the next five days, Marines managed to push the remainder of the Taliban out of the town, while coalition air support continued to engage the enemy positions in the surrounding mountains. Despite the initial successes of Eastern Resolve, only one polling station was opened in nearby Khawja Jamal village approximately eight kilometers away.⁴⁰² While some residents were willing to risk the journey to vote, far more remained out of sight.⁴⁰³

CONCLUSION: COUNTERINSURGENCY IN HELMAND

The enemy in Helmand is determined, well-organized, and entrenched in the province. In recent years, it has shown its ability to adapt to the evolving conflict by prioritizing objectives and executing coherent campaign plans. Coalition and Afghan forces must understand the enemy's objectives to best respond to the threat.

Over the past several years, coalition forces have engaged the enemy through targeted raids, designed to push insurgents out of a given area. These operations can best be described as "constant clearance operations."⁴⁰⁴ These efforts have failed to achieve lasting effects because they clear

an area but fail to prevent the insurgency from returning. Success in Helmand requires a focused and comprehensive population-centric counter-insurgency campaign to defeat the enemy.

As summer 2009 arrived, there was a realistic sense that the tide, at least in Helmand, was about to change. The U.S. Marines recognized the need to wage a counterinsurgency and launched the largest operation in Helmand in recent years; however, the majority of additional resources in the province were not focused on the main population centers and enemy strongholds in central Helmand. The U.S. Marine offensive, Operation *Khanjar*, was able to secure areas of Nawa and Garmser, two important population centers. Yet, thousands of additional Marines were sent south of Garmser to clear sparsely-populated terrain and disrupt insurgent lines of communication.

Given the resource limitations in Helmand, coalition forces must prioritize objectives. In counterinsurgency, the protection of the population is paramount, and coalition efforts must focus on critical population centers. For the enemy and indeed, the coalition, the most critical population centers in Helmand are located in Lashkar Gah and Gereshk, followed by Nad Ali, Nawa, Garmser, Sangin, Musa Qala and Kajaki.

Counterinsurgency is not only resource intensive, but also time-intensive. It takes time to develop an

understanding of the enemy and set the conditions for successful clearing. Successful counterinsurgency involves gaining the trust of the local population by living amongst them. Troops must demonstrate to the population their commitment to providing a secure environment. This constant interaction with the population also generates critical intelligence about the enemy. It takes time to hold an area and ensure that insurgents are not able to reinfiltate. Finally, it takes time to implement reconstruction and development projects once security has been established and maintained. Securing Helmand requires a sustained effort on the part of coalition forces.

Successful counterinsurgency requires a unity of effort amongst coalition and Afghan forces in Helmand. Operations must be simultaneous, contiguous, and mutually-reinforcing, so that the enemy cannot flee one area and regroup elsewhere. During the summer of 2009, Operations Panther's Claw and *Khanjar* were conducted simultaneously, yet the enemy was able to withdraw to areas on the periphery of the operations.

Finally, the role and responsibilities of the ANSF must be clearly articulated. There has been an overreliance on the ANP throughout much of Afghanistan, but particularly in Helmand. The ANP are not equipped for the combat-intensive initial phases of counterinsurgency. The appropriate role for the ANP should be maintaining order once the insurgency has been reduced to a manageable level and effective rule of law has been established. There have been numerous cases of alleged abuse, corruption and general incompetence among the ANP. Requiring them to perform a role for which they are ill-suited is the surest way to alienate local populations. The over-reliance on ANP in Helmand is a result of the shortage of ANA forces. The ANA is appropriate for the combat-intensive phases of counterinsurgency. Increasing the number of ANA in Helmand and advancing their capacity to carry out mission-critical counterinsurgency operations will help to relieve some of the burden that is currently shouldered by coalition forces.

Failure in Helmand will have consequences not

just for southern Afghanistan, but for the entire country. Instability in Helmand will hinder coalition and Afghan efforts to secure and stabilize surrounding provinces. Conversely, a stable Helmand can serve as a platform for Afghan and coalition efforts to the west and east in neighboring Kandahar. Although success will be neither easy nor quick, it is possible and necessary.

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