

The War in Southern Afghanistan

2001 – 2008

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Introduction

This study examines the history of the fighting in southern and western Afghanistan since 2001. The Marine Corps Intelligence Activity sponsored the study. Its purpose is to give Marines a basic understanding of what has happened in southern and western Afghanistan. Most Marines will operate in that area and we hope a historical reference source will be useful.

If the study has any single argument it is that government misrule has been a driving factor behind the continuing violence in southern and western Afghanistan. The Afghan government favored warlords, handicapped competent governors, took part in the poppy trade, and allowed the police to abuse the people. Scarcity of security forces and collateral damage from Coalition operations did not help either. Yet above all, we find it unlikely that the instability in southern and western Afghanistan today could have been averted without addressing government misrule.

The study is divided into 3 sections:

- The first section looks at the history of the fighting in southern Afghanistan from 2001 to 2006, when few Coalition forces were in the area. The focus is upon Helmand and Kandahar.
- The second section looks at the history of the fighting in southern Afghanistan from 2006 to 2008, a period of intense violence when Coalition reinforcements tried to hold back the Taliban tide. Again, the focus is upon Helmand and Kandahar, although we do cover events the western province of Farah.
- The third section looks at the history of the fighting in Farah province in detail.

Please also note the index at the end of the study, which hopefully enables Marines to look up topics of interest quickly.

The War in Southern Afghanistan, 2001–2006

Southern Afghanistan has always been the heart of the Taliban. It is where the Taliban originated and from where they conquered the vast majority of the country. It is now the main battlefield of the war in Afghanistan. Since 2006, the Taliban have held Kandahar, Afghanistan's second city, under threat. If they succeed in wresting it from the Afghan government, the state of Afghanistan will be dealt a crippling blow; perhaps a mortal one.

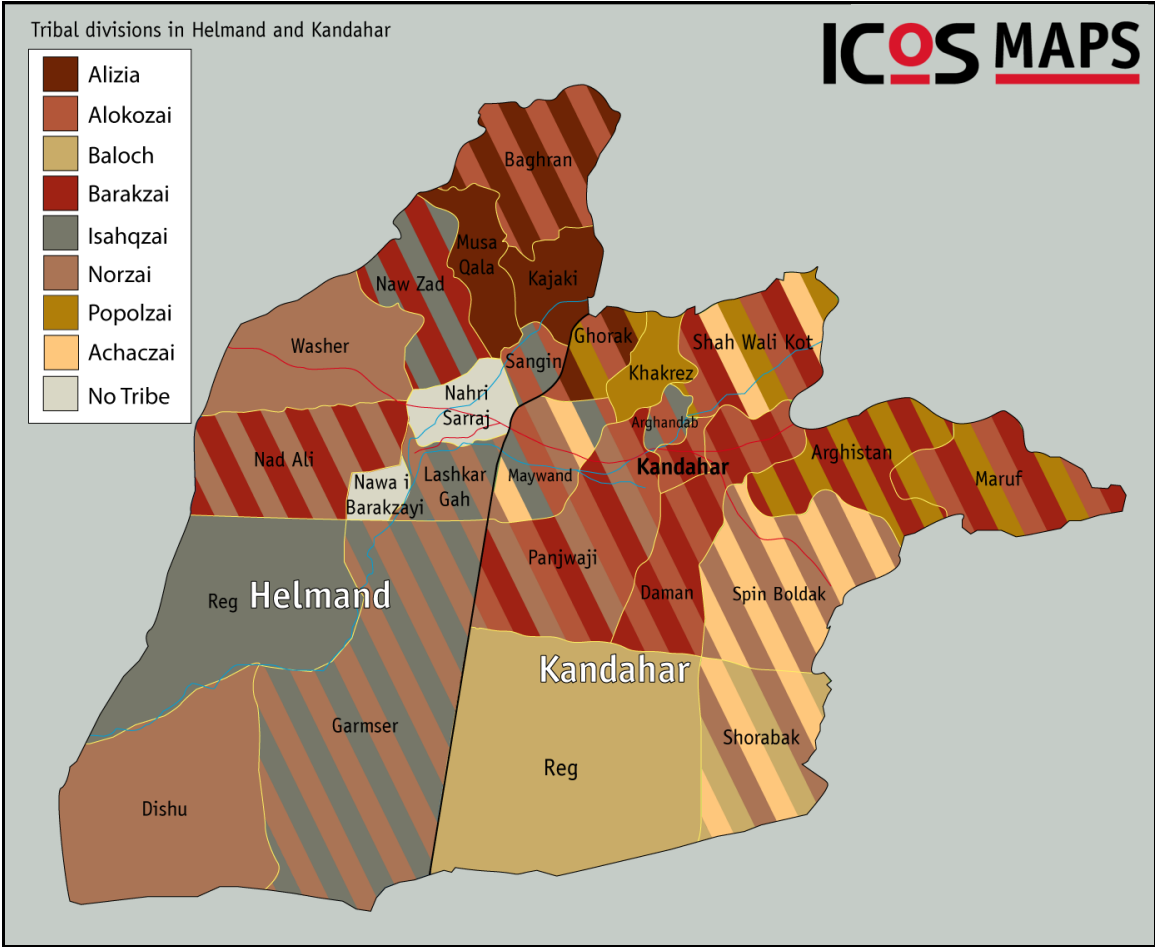
How did it come to this? After a supposedly crushing defeat at the hands of the Northern Alliance and United States, how did the Taliban all but regain control of the south? This paper attempts to answer that question, focusing on the period from 2002 to the middle of 2006. A second paper will look at how the Afghan government and Coalition have tried to push back the Taliban since the middle of 2006.

The key points from this section are:

- The resurgence of the Taliban in southern Afghanistan is largely due to a US and Afghan policy of backing warlords. The policy of working with warlords from certain tribes resulted in the exclusion of other tribes.
- The Taliban won over the allegiance of these marginalized tribes as well as other marginalized groups.
- With new tribal allies and a cut of the poppy trade, the Taliban were able to marshal sufficient resources to take on the government.
- Poppy eradication increased local opposition to the government.
- The government could not rally enough popular support to defeat the Taliban.
- The scarcity of Coalition forces allowed the Taliban to openly challenge the government but better government policies could have stopped the Taliban from having any popular or tribal support in the first place.

The Marine Corps Intelligence Activity sponsored this research. The conclusions herein do not necessarily represent the position of the United States Marine Corps.

Map 1) Tribal Divisions in Helmand and Kandahar



Source: "Afghanistan: Decision Point," The International Council on Security and Development, January 2008: 25.

How the Taliban Returned

At the end of 2001, US and Afghan forces pushed the Taliban out of southern Afghanistan. The Taliban leadership fled to Pakistan. For the most part, religious leaders, tribal elders, and fighters who had supported the Taliban accepted the new government led by President Hamid Karzai. For the following three years, the south and west of Afghanistan would be largely peaceful. Yet the Taliban had not disappeared. In 2006, they re-emerged in force. What had happened was that government leaders of southern Afghanistan had marginalized rival tribal leaders and pushed them into the arms of the Taliban. Sanctuary in Pakistan and the scarcity of Coalition forces in the south helped the Taliban get back into southern Afghanistan. However, neither would have mattered if government leaders had adopted policies that had not antagonized large segments of the population.

The Opposing Sides

Before 2001, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan with the assistance of groups from certain tribes, such as the Noorzai, the Alikozai, and the Itzakzai. The fall of the Taliban brought their opponents back into power, most importantly, the Barakzai and Popalzai tribes (see Table 1). Both the Barakzai and the Popalzai are leading tribes of the Durrani tribal confederation, an elite with a long history at the center of Afghan politics. Hamid Karzai belonged to the Popalzai tribe. The Barakzai traditionally ruled Afghanistan.

In order to build his political support, Karzai appointed warlords from other tribes, supporters of his family, and his own family members to positions of power in southern Afghanistan (see Table 2).

In Kandahar, Gul Agha Sherzai, a Barakzai with a large militia, became governor. The Achekzai tribe, which had been marginalized by the Taliban, backed him. The United States helped fund him. Another powerful figure was Ahmed Wali Karzai, Hamid Karzai's brother. He eventually became provincial council chairman. He also fielded a militia. These two strongmen filled provincial and district government positions with Barakzai and Popalzai elite.¹

Kandahar city itself was protected by the Alikozai militia of Mullah Naqibullah—an opponent of Sherzai but a supporter of Hamid Karzai—and the Alikozai police force of Akram Khakrezwal. Many Alikozai had realigned with Karzai in 2001 as the Taliban regime fell apart.

In Helmand, Karzai made his close friend, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, governor. The Akhundzada family was part of the powerful Alizai tribe, which dominated the province.² Sher Mohammed's brother, Amir Mohammed Akhundzada, became district governor of Musa Qala (northern Helmand), an area of strong Alizai presence. Sher Mohammed also

¹ Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, "The Inverted Cycle: Kabul and the Strongmen's Competition for Control over Kandahar, 2001–2006," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (June 2007): 175.

² Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking, 2008), 321–322.

allied with a warlord from the Alikozai tribe, Dad Mohammed Khan, who held power in Sangin (northeast Helmand).³

The Barakzai tribe tended to support the government in Helmand and certainly encouraged the relative security that existed in Lashkar Gah and the central heart of the Helmand River Valley.

Security forces in southern Afghanistan comprised the police and the “Afghan Military Forces.” The former were deputized militias that may have worn a uniform. The latter were little more than deputized militias with unit designations. Afghan Military Forces were not the Afghan National Army, which was being trained and gradually stood up under the supervision of the United States. The police and various Afghan Military Forces fell under commanders strongly tied to Sherzai or Sher Mohammed.

All of these leaders based their power on the opium trade. Drug barons as well as government officials, they ran parts of the trade, protected other drug barons, and made large profits from it. They used their political and military power against traditional opponents and competitors.

Table 1) Tribes of Helmand, Kandahar, and Zabul

Tribe	Province	Comment
Barakzai (Durrani)	Kandahar, Helmand	Traditional rulers of Afghanistan
Popalzai (Durrani)	Kandahar, Uruzgan	Tribe of President Hamid Karzai
Alikozai (Durrani)	Kandahar, Helmand	Many left the Taliban in 2001 to back Karzai
Achekzai (Durrani)	Kandahar	Backed Kandahar Governor Sherzai
Alizai (Durrani)	Helmand	Powerful tribe in Helmand
Noorzai (Durrani)	Kandahar, Helmand	Supported the Taliban (pre-2001)
Itzakzai (Durrani)	Kandahar	Supported the Taliban (pre-2001)
Hotak (Ghilzai)	Zabul	Competitors of the Durrani confederation
Khakar (Ghilzai)	Zabul, Uruzgan	Competitors of the Durrani confederation
Tokhi (Ghilzai)	Zabul	Competitors of the Durrani confederation
Baluch	Kandahar, Helmand	Non-Pashtun, reside near Pakistani border

Table 2) Warlords of Helmand and Kandahar, 2002–2005

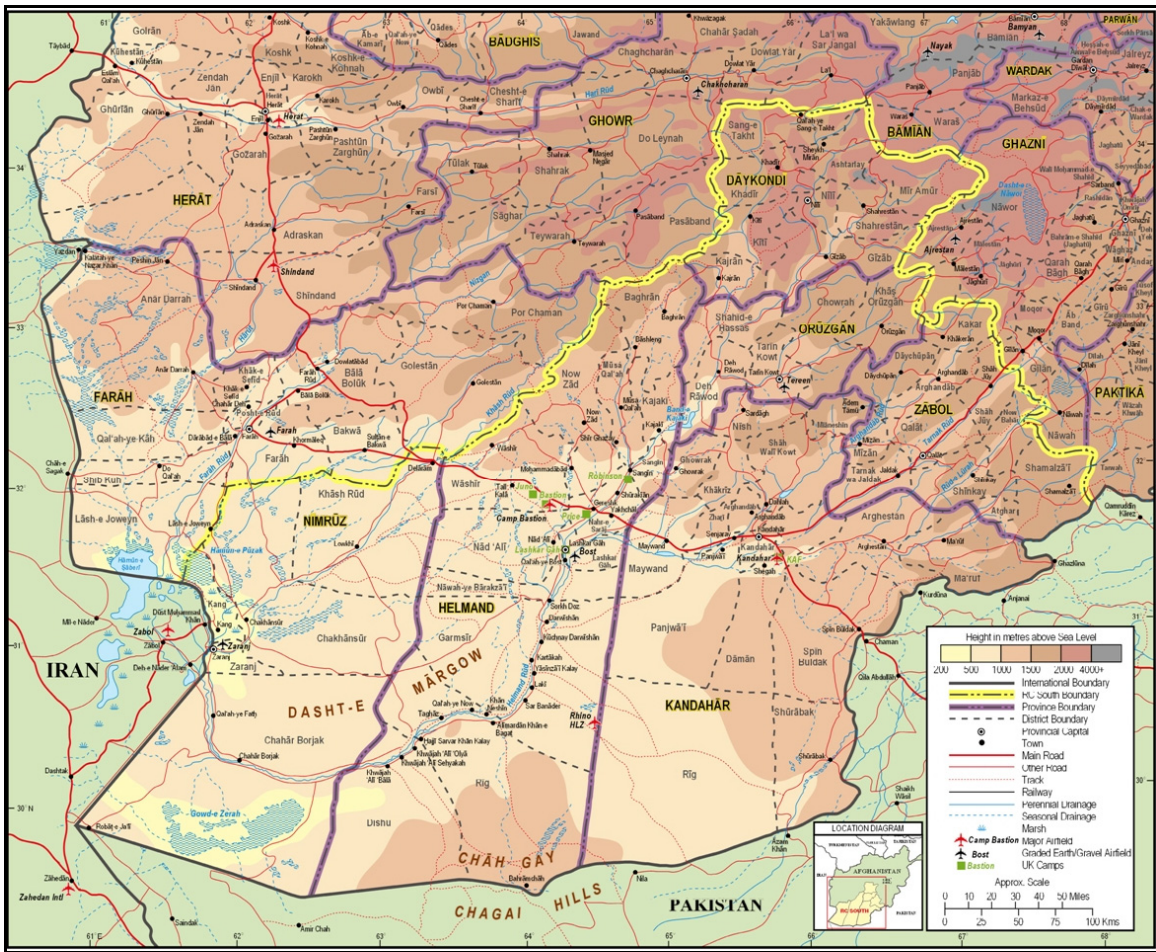
Name	Tribe	Province	Position
Gul Agha Sherzai	Barakzai	Kandahar	Governor*
Ahmed Wali Karzai	Popalzai	Kandahar	Prominent leader
Mullah Naqibullah	Alikozai	Kandahar	Militia commander
Abdul Razik	Achekzai	Kandahar	Militia commander
Sher Mohammed Akhundzada	Alizai	Helmand	Governor
Amir Dad Mohammed Khan	Alikozai	Helmand	Militia commander
Abdul Rahman Khan (Jan)	Noorzai	Helmand	Provincial police chief
Abdul Wahid (Rais Baghrani)	Alizai	Helmand	Militia commander

* Sherzai was briefly sent to Kabul in 2003.

³ Matt DuPee, “Karzai’s Lashkar; A Tribal Rogue’s Gallery,” *Afgaha.com*, 13 September 2006. Accessed 31 October 2008.

The newly marginalized tribes were the Noorzai in Kandahar and Helmand, the Itzakzai in Helmand, and certain Ghilzai tribes in Zabul. They neither received many government positions nor had their militias inducted into the police (with the exception of the Abdul Rahman Jan). The Noorzai and Itzakzai also played a large role in the drug trade, which put them at odds with the drug interests of the Achekzai-Barakzai-Popalzai-Alizai ruling class. Most of the tribes in Kandahar and Helmand were part of the Durrani tribal confederation, though some had links to the Ghilzai tribal confederation as well. The Ghilzai tribal confederation had been in conflict with the Durrani for centuries. Like the Noorzai and Itzakzai (who are Durrani), Ghilzai tribes received little assistance from the new leaders of southern Afghanistan.

Map 2) Regional Command South – Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Uruzgan, and Zabul (also shows Farah)



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Source: World Briefing Maps, RC South, Defence Geographic Centre, ICG, Ministry of Defence, United Kingdom, 2008. Online at <http://www.operations.mod.uk/mapping/RCSouth.jpg> (as of 7 January 2009).

To be clear, it is a little misleading to pose the conflict in southern Afghanistan as one of marginalized tribes versus empowered tribes. There is no such thing as a coherent tribe in southern Afghanistan. Tribes are fragmented and laid on top of one another across different districts and villages. A large number of elders wielding varying degrees of power exist in every tribe. No one elder controls an entire tribe. Indeed, under Pashtun custom, no Pashtun can give an order to another. So instead of different tribes fighting tribes, different groups (or sometimes family clans) from different tribes were in conflict. Other groups were not. Plenty of Noorzais worked with the pro-government leaders and plenty of Alizais and Achekzais supported the Taliban.⁴ For simplicity sake, though, we will continue to refer to tribes rather than specific sub-groups and clans.

The Taliban itself was not a tribal movement but an insurgent movement with extensive religious connections and, eventually, tribal alliances. Mullah Omar still led the Taliban. After 2001, he started to reform the movement in Pakistan. Extensive training and organizational activities started up. In 2003, Mullah Omar formed the Quetta shura (located in Quetta, the capital of the Pakistani province of Baluchistan) to coordinate the activities of multiple Taliban sub-groups. The principal operational commander in southern Afghanistan was Mullah Dadullah Lang, a 25-year veteran of Afghan wars.⁵ Mullah Dadullah was from the Kakar tribe, part of the Ghilzai tribal confederation.

Opportunity Lost: 2002–2004

From 2001 to 2004, Kandahar, Helmand, and the other southern and western provinces were relatively calm.

In Kandahar, Governor Sherzai solidified his hold on power. His US funding thinned but he was able to make this up with opium profits and illegal appropriation of customs taxes at the Spin Boldak border crossing with Pakistan. Sherzai delivered spoils and patronage to his own supporters, at the expense of the Noorzai. His Achekzai militia helped secure his position against the Taliban. Unfortunately, over the long term, his militia would undermine security by taxing the people and threatening elders.⁶ No rule of law existed to punish militias for their transgressions.⁷

Another Achekzai militia, under Abdul Razik, served as the border police, based at Spin Boldak. Abdul Razik was a charismatic figure who drew fierce loyalty from his men. He excelled at small unit tactics and leading men in battle. The Taliban had killed his father, earning Abdul Razik's vengeance. He was no friend of the Taliban but also did not stop his Achekzai tribesmen (the minority tribe in the area) from extorting illegal taxes and branding the Noorzai as Taliban.⁸

⁴ Giustozzi and Ullah, "The Inverted Cycle," 183.

⁵ Elizabeth Rubin, "In the Land of the Taliban," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 2006.

⁶ Giustozzi and Ullah, "The Inverted Cycle," 173.

⁷ Some US units worked with Sherzai's militia, others did not. USIP Afghanistan Experience Project, Interview #33, 13 July 2005.

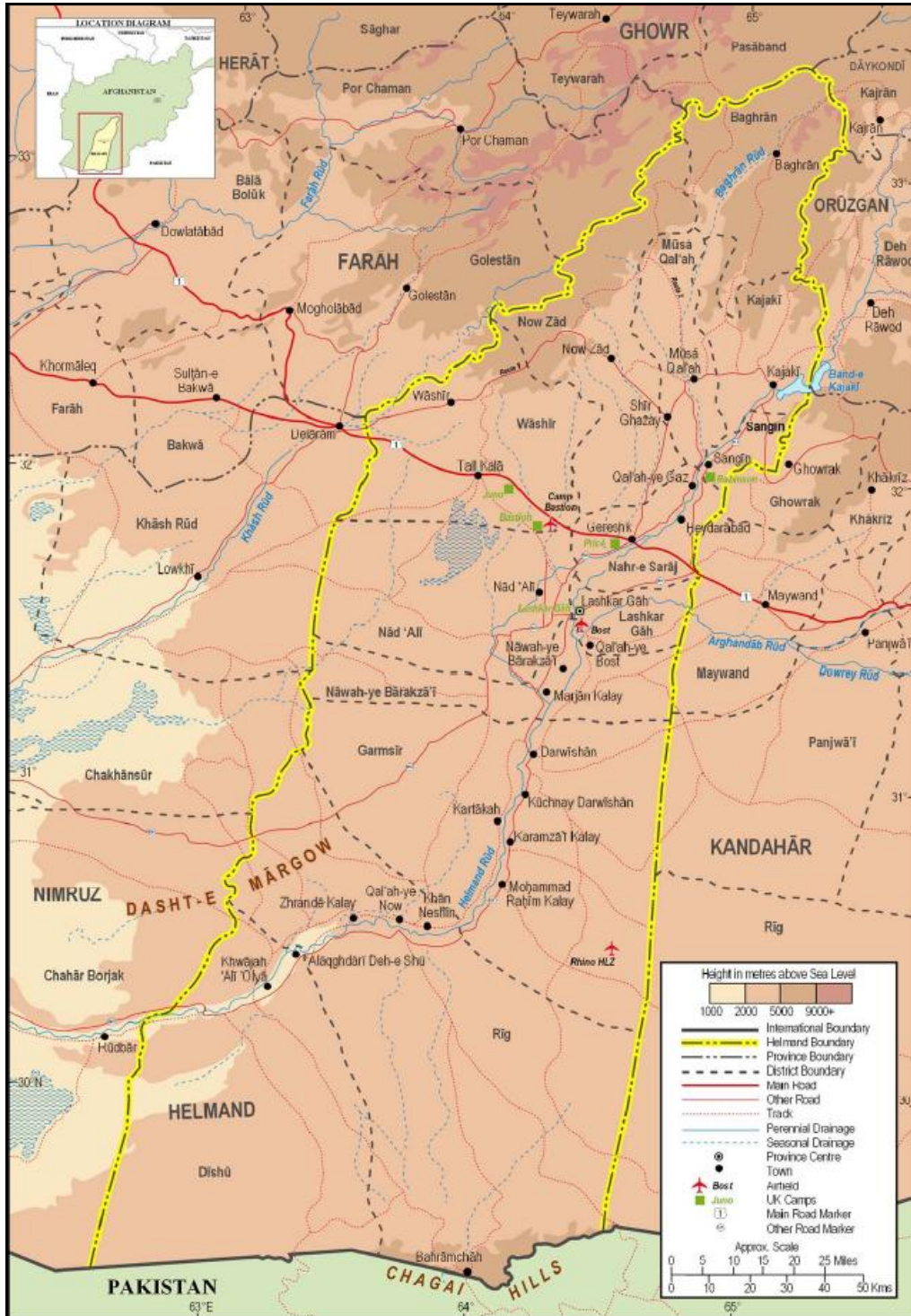
⁸ Interview with Captain John Duorak and Captain Dan Snow, Fort Riley, 29 October 2008. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 48, 55.

In Helmand, Sher Mohammed charted the same course as Sherzai. He empowered his Akhundzada clan by distributing patronage to them, such as land or profits from narcotics. Sher Mohammed was deeply involved in the opium trade (along with the provincial chief of police, Abdul Rahman Jan). Some mullahs and teachers opposed to poppy production were reportedly gunned down. His militia was brutal. In 2003, they raided a town in Musa Qala, ostensibly to go after Taliban. They left 80 dead, mostly civilians whose families Sher Mohammed refused to compensate. Helping the people was not his priority. From 2001 to 2003, Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital, had no paved roads, no electricity, and no running water. Abdul Rahman Jan's police were not much better. Together with Sher Mohammed's own 100-man militia, they abused and taxed the people at illegal checkpoints.⁹ In Sangin, Dad Mohammed Khan marginalized the majority Itzakzai tribe, who also dominated the poppy in the area. They were heavily taxed.¹⁰

⁹ Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Eugene Augustine, PRT Lashkar Gah commander (2004–2005), 6 August 2008. Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Jim Hogberg, Commander of PRT Lashkar Gah, (2005–2006), 4 September 2008. Patrick Bishop, *3PARA* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 153.

¹⁰ Discussion with Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 24 October 2008. Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 321–322.

Map 3) Helmand Province



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Source: World Briefing Maps, Helmand Province (Afghanistan), Defence Geographic Centre, ICG, Ministry of Defence, United Kingdom, 2008. Online at <http://www.operations.mod.uk/mapping/HelmandProvince.jpg> (as of 7 January 2009).

Sher Mohammed's thuggery opened the door for the Taliban to return to Helmand in force. The Taliban, in fact, attributed their success in the province to Sher Mohammed and his militias. The Taliban approached the victims of abuse and offered their support, sometimes paying them thousands of dollars. Their allegiance was not hard to win.¹¹

Along Helmand's green zone, the Taliban took advantage of the situation of non-native farmers and migrant workers. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, large-scale irrigation projects and the construction of the Kajaki dam drew large numbers of Afghans to the Helmand River. No tribal barriers stood in the way of Taliban infiltration. Moreover, the farmers had little reason to oppose Taliban infiltration. Without local tribal links, these non-natives suffered at the hands of the Akhundzadas. The Taliban were just as good for them as the status quo. Migrant workers, who came to work on farms and pick poppy, were in a similar situation—unprotected and amenable to Taliban influence.

Marginalized tribes proved the real jewel, though. The Taliban allied themselves with the Itzakzai tribe in Sangin and minority clans of the Alizai in Baghran, Kajaki, and Musa Qala. The Noorzai and Itzakzai provided food, shelter, and intelligence to Taliban leaders and facilitators infiltrating into Afghanistan from Pakistan. Later they would provide the majority of the fighters.¹² The same thing was happening in Kandahar.¹³

Besides co-opting tribes and non-native farmers, the Taliban moved to take over religious leadership of the south, which had not been speaking in their favor. The Kandahar Ulema Shura, a council of religious leaders in Kandahar, consistently issued fatwas condemning Taliban attacks and the killing of civilians. Their fatwas held greater influence over the people than statements by Afghan political leaders on the television or radio. Between 2003 and 2005, the Taliban started re-constructing their religious networks in the south in the south, starting in Zabul's Shah Joy district. "Wandering mullahs" ventured to rural districts to extend Taliban religious influence over local religious leaders. Other mullahs went into Kandahar city to counter the influence of the Kandahar Ulema Shura. Religious networks formed in northern Helmand in 2004. Violence accompanied the religious networks. Most notably, in June and July 2003, the Taliban killed three mullahs in Kandahar.¹⁴

In many places, there was no one to stop the Taliban. The Coalition usually had a battalion in Kandahar (see Table 3). They never deployed enough men to control all of Kandahar, let alone both Kandahar and Helmand. The government and its tribal allies did not make up the difference. Relying on militias for security, the government never built up the Afghan National Police (ANP). The average district had 15–50 police, too few to do more than

¹¹ Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 60. Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 322.

¹² Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 22, 60–61.

¹³ In 2007, *The Globe and Mail*, a Canadian newspaper had an Afghan researcher interview 42 Taliban from throughout Kandahar province. Sixteen of those Taliban were Noorzai or Itzakzai. Only 5 were Barakzai, Popalzai, or Alikozai. Graeme Smith, "Talking to the Taliban," <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/talkingtothetaliban/>, accessed 1 February 2009.

¹⁴ Sean Maloney, "A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 206, 215. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 42–44, 50.

defend their own headquarters. Some districts had no government presence at all. Where the government was not, the Taliban and their tribal allies could intimidate the people and prevent them from supporting the government.¹⁵ The Taliban set up strong networks in areas of weak government presence, such as Shah Wali Kot district in northern Kandahar, Zharey and Panjwai districts west of Kandahar city, and Maruf district on the Pakistani border.¹⁶

Table 3) US battalions in southern Afghanistan, 2001–2006

Unit	Province	Time Period
26 MEU and 15 MEU	Helmand	November 2001–2002
3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne HQ	Kandahar	July 2002–January 2003
1-505th PIR	Kandahar	July 2002–January 2003
3-505th PIR	Kandahar	July 2002–September 2002
1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne HQ	Kandahar	February 2003–August 2003
1-504th PIR	Kandahar	February 2003–August 2003
2-22th Infantry	Kandahar	August 2003–May 2004
22 MEU, BLT 1/6	Uruzgan	April 2004–August 2004
3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division	Kandahar	May 2004–June 2005
2 US Army infantry companies	Uruzgan	May 2004–June 2005
2-5th Infantry	Zabul	May 2004–June 2005
173rd Airborne Brigade HQ	Kandahar	March 2005–March 2006
3-319th Artillery	Kandahar	March 2005–March 2006
2/503rd Airborne	Kandahar, Zabul	March 2005–March 2006

The false calm of Kandahar and Helmand was not mirrored in Zabul (bordering Kandahar to the northeast and east), a rugged province with few Coalition forces (after 2004, one battalion operated out of Qalat, the provincial capital). Its border with Pakistan offered the Taliban an easy infiltration route while the inhabitants of its mountain valleys in the north had little love for the government. Large and capable groups of fighters lived in the distant and rugged northern districts of Kaki Afghan, Mazan, and Dai Chopan. A few Taliban cadres had taken refuge in these areas in 2002.¹⁷

The Taliban regained influence in Zabul through their religious network and exploiting tribal rifts. Mullah Dadullah supervised the Taliban's infiltration into Zabul. Events there foreshadowed the future of Helmand and Kandahar. Zabul was divided between the majority Ghilzai (Hotak, Khakar, and Tokhi tribes) and the minority Durrani Pashtuns. These Ghilzai tribes were inclined to oppose the government, on the basis of the longstanding rift between the Ghilzais and Durrani. When Karzai replaced the governor in 2003, a Tokhi Ghilzai, with a Durrani, elements of that tribe stopped fighting for the government.

From 2003 to 2005, the Coalition and Afghan security forces periodically got into major firefights in Zabul. In the summer of 2003, dozens of Afghan National Army soldiers and police died fighting in Dai Chopan district. When US forces started launching counterstrikes

¹⁵ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 30, 177.

¹⁶ Maloney, "A Violent Impediment," 207, 208.

¹⁷ *Ibid*: 203.

against suspected insurgent safe havens, the violence only worsened. In September of that year, Operation Mountain Viper was launched with the purpose of clearing out 500 Taliban under Mullah Dadullah. Fighting lasted for nine days. Security did not improve. By winter, five of seven districts fell under Taliban control. Elders in these districts opposed the government. In certain cases, those who did not were executed. Fighting persisted in 2004.¹⁸

One last factor has not been discussed in the Taliban's post-2001 activities in Helmand and Kandahar—poppies. The poppy trade probably had something to do with the Taliban's return to power. Poppy production in Helmand and Kandahar equaled between \$200 and \$400 million per year between 2004 and 2006, based on the price of opium and the number of hectares under cultivation. Such sums dwarf US development spending in any province. While the average poppy farmer or landowner saw little of that, it seems unlikely that the Taliban could ever have amassed the resources to take on the poppy-funded Popalzai, Alizai, and Barakzai without getting a major cut of the poppy trade themselves.

The Taliban, together with the Noorzai, Itzakzai, other tribes, and non-native farmers, may have been able to capture a substantial share of the poppy trade. Between 2004 and 2007, poppy cultivation in Afghanistan grew from 75,000 hectares to 175,000 hectares. The Taliban may have seized a large share of this expanding poppy trade, most likely by extorting or offering protection to poppy farmers and smugglers not aligned with the pro-government warlords. The Taliban may have gone from getting a share of the poppy profits from very few hectares in 2002 to very many by 2005, even while the pro-government warlords maintained or expanded their own shares. Thereby, the pro-government warlords may have found themselves without a decisive resource advantage over the Taliban, especially if the Taliban had allied with marginalized tribes and non-native farmers at the same time. There is not enough evidence to know exactly how the Taliban massed enough resources to rival the pro-government warlords but poppy probably had something to do with it.

The End of the Beginning: 2005

The year of 2005 set the stage for the upheaval that would occur in 2006. Low-level skirmishes and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, hitherto uncommon, became more commonplace (see Figure 1). In April 2005, the Taliban media spokesman, Abdul Latif Hakimi, declared that government officials, aid workers, and Coalition forces would now be targeted. Over the year, district governors were assassinated and suicide car bombs and suicide bombers went off regularly. Night letters threatened those working with the government, labeling them collaborators or spies.¹⁹ Improvised explosive devices, the scourge of Iraq, came to Afghanistan, striking not just Coalition forces but the softer police patrols and convoys as well.²⁰

While the Taliban were taking out the competition, the government was at last trying to reform itself. An idealistic militia demobilization program—meant to transfer responsibility

¹⁸ Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Lee Knight, PRT Qalat commander (2004–2005), 11 August 2008. Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 247, 253. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 50, 51, 56, 179.

¹⁹ Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Eugene Augustine, PRT Lashkar Gah commander (2004–2005), 6 August 2008. Maloney, "A Violent Impediment," 206.

²⁰ Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Jim Hogberg, Commander of PRT Lashkar Gah, (2005–2006), 4 September 2008.

from militias (known as Afghan Military Forces) to trained government security forces (Afghan National Army)—removed some of the militias that had been keeping the Taliban down. Though some joined the Afghan National Army there were now fewer security forces out on the streets and in the villages.²¹

More importantly, Karzai finally removed the warlords from power. Sherzai went in June, replaced by Asadullah Khalid, a 39-year old outsider who lacked an independent power base and was beholden to Ahmed Wali.²² Sher Mohammed followed in December, after the British lobbied to have him removed when 9 tons of opium was found in his offices. Mohammed Daoud, an engineer from the Safi tribe of eastern Afghanistan who had been born in Helmand, replaced him. Daoud had a solid background in development and no direct ties to opium; a model civil servant, in contrast to Sher Mohammed.

These moves had few positive effects. For one thing, the warlords never fell out of the picture. Asadullah Khalid and Mohammed Daoud lacked the political base to overcome their influence. Through his brother, Amir Mohammed, who was the new deputy governor, Sher Mohammed still exercised power in Helmand even though he was now a member of the Afghan parliament. With the departure of Sherzai, Ahmed Wali emerged as the most powerful leader in Kandahar. He gained control of the police though his dominance of opium profits. This tied them to his own policies of marginalizing other tribes.

At the same time, the opposition to the Taliban had been weakened. The tribes and commanders opposing the Taliban lost important sources of patronage. Their removal from government positions and the disbandment of militias curtailed cuts from taxes and other legal and illicit sources of income. Influence over the police declined as well. In Helmand, in 2006, Akhundzada's militia would stop fighting the Taliban. Regarding the removal of Sher Mohammed, Karzai himself later said: "I made the mistake of listening to [the British]. And when they came in, the Taliban came."²³ The most damage was done in Kandahar. The Alikozai tribe lost leadership of Afghan Military Forces and the Kandahar city police. Denied a source of patronage, Mullah Naqibullah could no longer maintain the loyalty of all of the men in his Alikozai militia and the Arghandab police (who were also Alikozai). As a result, small numbers of Taliban were able to infiltrate into the Arghandab and Kandahar city itself.²⁴

Meanwhile, the Taliban's religious campaign continued apace. Mullahs openly supporting the government came under attack. The Taliban killed 12 mullahs and issued numerous death threats between the summer of 2005 and the start of 2006. Most notably, on 29 May 2005, the Taliban murdered the head of the Kandahar Ulema Shura, Maulawi Abdullah Fayeze. He had denounced Mullah Omar and said that the Taliban had no foundation in Islam. According to him, they were not worthy of jihad. At his funeral, a suicide bomber killed Mohammed Akram Khakrezwal, the honest and respected former Kandahar police chief. Two more religious scholars were killed on 21 August in Panjwai.²⁵

²¹ Maloney, "A Violent Impediment," 207.

²² Sherzai had left briefly in 2003 to be governor of Kabul.

²³ "Friendly Fire in Afghanistan," *The Economist*, 2 February 2008: 62.

²⁴ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 61. Giustozzi and Ullah, "The Inverted Cycle," 176.

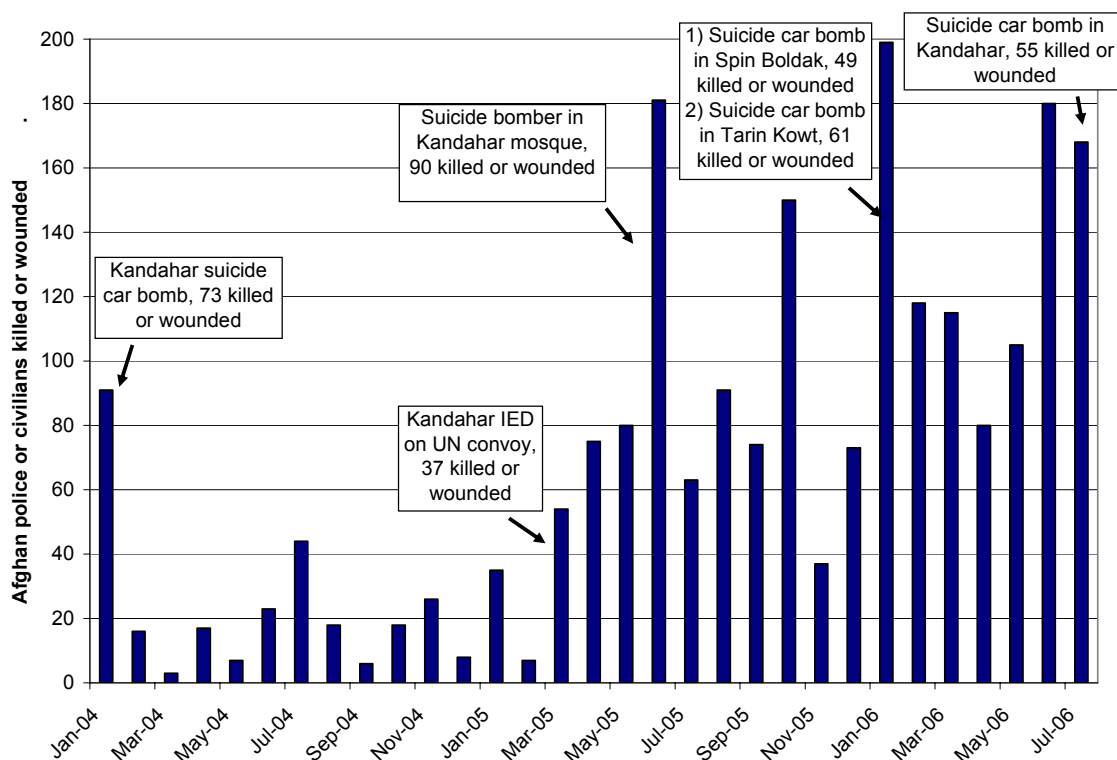
²⁵ Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban* (New York: Penguin, 2007). Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 336. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 46.

The Taliban also attacked schools and teachers. Infamously, in Shah Wali Kot district, the Taliban beheaded a teacher in front of his own class. Twenty schools were destroyed in the last four months of 2005. Two hundred then shut down throughout the southern provinces.²⁶

Fortunately, the September parliamentary elections passed without significant incident. Unfortunately, Coalition commanders read this as a sign that security was good.²⁷ The elections hid how much had fallen apart.

The situation became particularly bloody in Helmand during the autumn. The Taliban mounted guerrilla-style hit and run attacks, IED attacks, and assassinations in the districts of Dishu, Sangin, Garmser, Nowzad, Baghran, and Nad Ali. Over 50 police were killed, including 19 in a single ambush in Dishu district in southern Helmand, bordering Pakistan. By the end of the year, the Taliban held sway over that district.²⁸

Figure 1) Civilian and police casualties in Farah, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Uruzgan, and Zabul, 2004–2006²⁹



²⁶ Maloney, "A Violent Impediment," 207.

²⁷ Colonel Kevin Owens Defense Department News Briefing, FDCH Political Transcripts, 23 September 2005.

²⁸ National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

²⁹ Data is from the National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

At the time, the Coalition presence in southern Afghanistan was the 173rd Airborne Brigade, commanded by Colonel Kevin Owens; 3,400 men spread across Kandahar, Helmand, and Zabul. One of its units—2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment—operated in Kandahar. Owens pushed his forces out on raiding missions against Taliban sanctuaries in mountainous Zabul and the northern districts of Kandahar. In his words, “I think we’ve had a lot of success...being able to...go where coalition forces haven’t been able to operate effectively in the past.”³⁰ Unfortunately, the population that needed protection was not in the mountains.

The only US unit in Helmand was the 74th Long Range Surveillance Detachment (roughly the size of a company), under the command of Captain Dirk Ringgenberg (see Table 4). It arrived in August and operated with one company of the 3rd Kandak, 2nd Brigade, 2nd Afghan National Army Division. Highly effective tactically, Ringgenberg defeated several Taliban units in a series of quick strikes up and down the Helmand River. Unfortunately, the unit was too small and present for too short a time to secure the population. In October, the unit moved to Kandahar, where it conducted more operations. Despite impressive tactical successes, it could not stave off the growing Taliban influence.³¹

*Table 4) Operations of 74th Long Range Surveillance Detachment in Helmand and Kandahar*³²

Date	Operation	Location	Comments
18 August 2005	Operation Wild Weasel	Nowzad	
3 September 2005	Operation Thunderstruck	Nowzad	
9 September 2005	Operation Unforgiven	Sangin	60 enemy casualties
16 September 2005	Operation Eagle Eyes	NA	Election support
23 September 2005	Operation Qal’eh ye gaz I	Sangin	
3 October 2005	Operation Qal’eh ye gaz II	Sangin	Significant combat
12 October 2005	Operation Ghar	Sangin	
16 October 2005	74th LRSD moves to Kandahar	NA	
10 November 2005	Operation Ghorak	Ghorak	Mounted patrol
13 November 2005	Operation Counterstrike	KAF	Uneventful
21 November 2005	Operation Afghan Ghar	Mianeshin	
3 December 2005	Operation Mianeshin I	Mianeshin	3-day battle
13 December 2005	Operation Mianeshin II	Mianeshin	3-day battle
9 January 2006	Operation Mianeshin III	Mianeshin	Presence patrols
18 January 2006	Operation Mianeshin IV	Mianeshin	Presence patrols
29 January 2006	Operation Mianeshin V	Mianeshin	Aggressive patrol
1 February 2006	Operation Katasong	Shah Wali Kot	Long range patrol

The Taliban did not escape undefeated. Achekzai and Alizai militias and their affiliated police were ready to fight. Achekzai villagers in Spin Boldak forced out the Taliban after a gun battle in January 2006. Similarly, Haji Lalai Mama of Loi Karez in Kandahar formed a village defense force.³³ Unfortunately, such successes would soon become few and far between. The Taliban had set themselves up well. With key tribes on their side, a strong

³⁰ Colonel Kevin Owens, Defense Department News Briefing, FDCH Political Transcripts, 23 September 2005.

³¹ Interviews with Major Rigggenberg, Fort Leavenworth, 27–28 October 2008.

³² Ibid.

³³ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 50.

religious network, local leaders intimidated, and funding from the poppy trade, they were ready to strike.

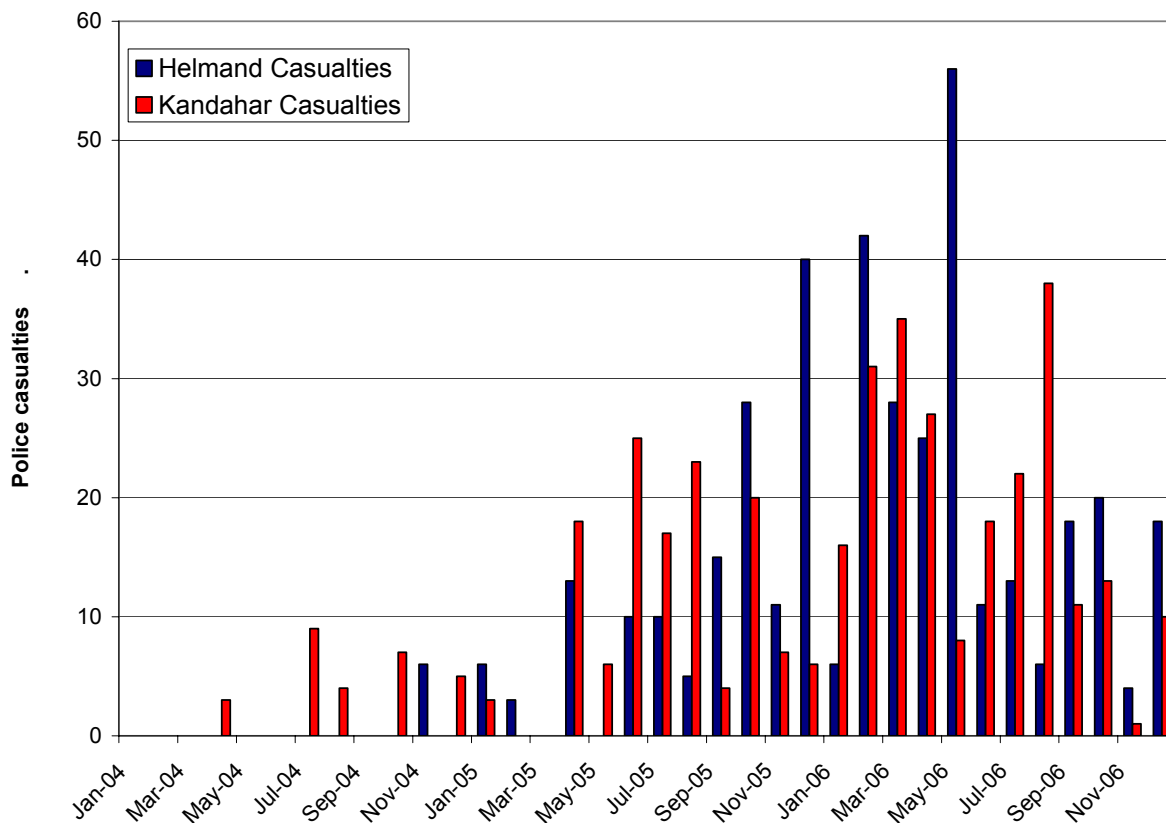
The 2006 Taliban Spring Offensive: Open Warfare

During the first half of 2006, the Taliban rose up. After spending four years rebuilding an underground movement, they moved out of the shadows and into the open, mounting conventional-style attacks on the Afghan National Police and the militias aligned with the government. Mullah Dadullah's goal was apparently to gain control of parts of the south. Some observers believed he ultimately wanted to capture Kandahar city itself.³⁴

Kandahar

The "spring" offensive kicked off in January in Kandahar. Fighting broke out in 11 of Kandahar's 13 districts. District centers throughout the province were hit. The traditional government strongholds of Kandahar city and Spin Boldak suffered suicide car bomb and IED attacks. Provincial Governor Asadullah Khalid himself endured a series of attacks. Above all, the police were the main target. The Taliban hit police headquarters in outlying districts (such as Rigestan and Maruf) and patrols and checkpoints in any district.

³⁴ Maloney, "A Violent Impediment," 211, 212.

Figure 2) Police casualties in Kandahar and Helmand, 2004–2006³⁵

Coalition forces and civilians were targets as well. One suicide car bomb in Spin Boldak caused 49 civilian casualties. Another in Kandahar city killed a Canadian ambassador working with the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). As a result, the PRT, which had been trying to strengthen governance and accelerate economic development, reduced its activities, leaving the Taliban with one fewer competitor for the hearts and minds of the people.³⁶

Taliban influence expanded from Shah Wali Kot into Maiwand, Zharey, and Panjwai (bastions of the Noorzai tribe). The arrival of a Canadian battle group early in February and Ahmed Wali's militia probably helped prevent the Taliban from gaining a foothold in Kandahar city itself. Amid the larger-scale attacks, the Ulema Shura retained a great deal of popular support and continued to condemn Taliban attacks. Consequently, the Taliban assassinated three popular mullahs and persisted in attempts to hamstring the shura.³⁷ The critical piece, though, was played by Mullah Naqibullah's Alikozai militia, which kept the

³⁵ Data is from the National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

³⁶ The Canadians took over the PRT in Kandahar in July 2005. They provided a larger civilian and military complement than the United States had been able to provide. Maloney, "A Violent Impediment," 210.

³⁷ Ibid: 215.

Taliban from capturing the fertile Arghandab Valley just north of Kandahar city (known as the “gateway to Kandahar”).

Still, the Taliban all but seized control over rural areas formerly under government influence, most notably Zharey and Panjwai, two districts with large Noorzai populations that had been quiet and had received substantial development aid before 2005. Yet the Taliban had been able to exploit Noorzai rivalry with government leaders in order to gain local support.³⁸ They set up an underground infrastructure and even constructed defensive positions in the Pashmul area to protect it. Local tribesmen aligned with the Taliban and formed the bulk of the fighting units in the area. Abdul Razik’s Achekzai militia from Spin Boldak was sent to secure Zharey and Panjwai. The Noorzais roundly defeated them. When police from Kandahar (under the influence of Ahmed Wali, another competitor of the Noorzai) tried to come in and secure the districts in the spring of 2006, they too met fierce resistance and were turned back. The Canadians suspected that well over 1,000 fighters defended the area.³⁹

In the aftermath of their success, the Taliban consolidated their control over the two districts. Pashmul became an armed camp. Women and children fled. Taliban manned checkpoints and patrolled the streets.⁴⁰

Helmand

As bad as it was in Kandahar, the situation in Helmand where pro-government and Coalition forces were weaker was as bad, if not worse.

The Taliban offensive, organized by Mullah Dadullah, started on 3 February with three simultaneous attacks on government posts. All three were in the northern part of the province: the Musa Qala police headquarters, the Nowzad district center, and the Sangin police headquarters. In Musa Qala (an Akhundzada power base), the Taliban killed the district police chief and wounded four policemen. Nowzad escaped with only one officer killed. Sangin took the biggest hit. Three hundred Taliban fell upon the Sangin district police headquarters. Many were Itzakzai upset at Alikozai dominance over the town and determined to drive out Dad Mohammed Khan’s militia.⁴¹ Fighting lasted for three days before air strikes finally drove off the attackers. Five police were killed and sixteen were wounded.⁴²

Over the following days, attacks continued. Posts, patrols, tribal elders, religious leaders, district chiefs, and district governors were all targets, members of the Akhundzada clan in particular. The Taliban infiltrated into the heart of Helmand’s population—the districts of Gereshk, Lashkar Gah, and Nad Ali. A police post in Gereshk was overrun; four police were killed, and three were kidnapped and later found dead. A post in Nad Ali suffered a similar fate. A few police were even taken from their homes and beheaded. Though the Taliban

³⁸ Elizabeth Rubin, “In the Land of the Taliban,” *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 2006.

³⁹ Harjit Sajjon, “How the Taliban Gained a Foothold in Southern Afghanistan in 2006,” Presentation to the Center for a New American Security, 4 December 2008. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 55.

⁴⁰ Adnan Khan, “The View from Ambush Alley,” *Macleans*, 11 September 2006.

⁴¹ His nephew had already been killed.

⁴² National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008. Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 359. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 60.

lacked the strength to overthrow the government in these districts, it was clear that no district was safe from their attacks.⁴³

The Taliban gained their first real foothold in Musa Qala. According to one resident, “The government was in Musa Qala and everything was fine. But then the Taliban attacked the district office and the police station, and took control over the areas around Musa Qala bazaar. There was fighting everyday. Some of our relatives were killed and wounded.”⁴⁴ The district police chief was killed at the end of March.⁴⁵ It would be nearly two years before the government truly re-asserted control of the district.

The police did not help its situation by continuing to treat the population poorly: arresting innocent people in order to extort their family members, looting private property, and selling seized opium.⁴⁶

The poppy eradication program did not help either. In March, Afghan authorities launched an eradication program funded by the United States and United Kingdom. The eradication program did nothing to improve the position of Helmand Governor Mohammed Daoud or Kandahar Governor Asadullah Khalid. At the time they most needed popular support, the income of thousands of farmers was cut down. Worse, the government enforced eradication in a biased fashion. The land of tribes in competition with Ahmed Wali or Sher Mohammed, such as the Noorzai, was targeted for eradication. Additionally, wealthy landowners may have been exempt and farmers could escape eradication if they could pay a fee. In general, Afghan farmers strongly opposed the program. It took away their livelihood. Some called for retaliation. Others fought.⁴⁷

In Helmand, the program started in Dishu but resistance was so great that it was shifted to Nowzad and Garmser. One woman from Sangin said, “the government and foreigners would destroy the [opium] crops. But this was the only income for the poor people.”⁴⁸ Elizabeth Rubin, a journalist writing for the *New York Times Magazine*, quoted one poppy farm owner: “Why do you think people put mines out for the British...doing eradication when they came here to save us?...Thousands of lands [sic] ready for harvest were destroyed. How difficult will it be for our people to tolerate that! You are taking the food of my children, cutting my feet and disabling me.”⁴⁹ The Taliban deftly exploited the situation to win more support, stepping in to protect farmers against poppy eradication and offering to cancel any debts the farmers carried.⁵⁰

Attacks in Helmand peaked in May when Mullah Dadullah launched massed attacks against the district centers. On the night of 17 May, the Taliban and ANP fought for eight hours at the district center in Musa Qala (roughly 100 ANP held the town of Musa Qala). The ANP

⁴³ National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

⁴⁴ “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008: 99–100.

⁴⁵ National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

⁴⁶ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 175, 177.

⁴⁷ “Helmand at War,” Senlis Council Report, 2 June 2008.

⁴⁸ “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008: 105.

⁴⁹ Rubin, “In the Land of the Taliban.”

⁵⁰ “Afghan Insurgency Assessment,” Senlis Council Report, 7 April 2006: 11, 12, 15, 16, 18, 21, 25.

recovered 14 Taliban bodies but suffered 13 killed and 5 wounded themselves.⁵¹ Amir Akhundzada's militia and 30 newly arrived British Paras reinforced the ANP. In subsequent fighting, the tenacity of the ANP impressed the British. A sergeant major told journalist Patrick Bishop: "They weren't shy of getting amongst it... One of them was shot through the calf and one through the shoulder and after they were patched up they wanted to get straight back to the fighting which I thought was quite hard of them."⁵²

The problem for the ANP was not fighting spirit but the support of the people. Without it, the Taliban could repeatedly re-enter Musa Qala. Fighting resumed in Musa Qala on 22 May. By then, the police had taken refuge in their station, rarely venturing out. Several days of fighting followed. With the cooperation of the ANP, the British drove back the Taliban but now found themselves garrisoning the district center (Amir Akhundzada's militia did not stay).⁵³

Fighting spanned beyond Musa Qala. Throughout the province, ANP and ANA convoys were ambushed. The provincial chief of police was one target. Insurgents failed to kill him but did get a district police chief and two senior former mujahedin commanders. Associates of Sher Mohammed Akhundzada were also targeted.⁵⁴ Some policemen were even kidnapped and then decapitated. The district governor of Nowzad begged for British support lest the Taliban overrun the police. The police in Nowzad were from Lashkar Gah and Gereshk; the lack of local connections, on top of their abusive behavior, may have made it more difficult for them to collect intelligence on the Taliban. Haji Zainokhan, district governor of Baghran, and his retinue fled to Camp Bastion in a British helicopter.⁵⁵ Insurgents killed or wounded 56 police in Helmand that month—more than in any other month to that point.⁵⁶

The final blow came in Sangin. Amir Dad Mohammed Khan (also known as "Amir Dado"), the Alikozai warlord who controlled the district (he was a representative in the Afghan legislature in Kabul), had few local supporters. The district governor, Amir Jan, had been killed in March. In June, members of the majority Itzakzai tribe associated with the Taliban defeated Dad Mohammed's militia and gained control of the district center. Large numbers of Dad Mohammed's family were killed in the process.⁵⁷ One resident related, "The fight started after Amir Dad Mohammed Khan's brother was killed. The situation worsened with more than fifty supporters of Amir Dad Mohammed killed in one day. The district office was seized, forcing the [new] District Governor to leave. Soon after there was general fighting and bombings."⁵⁸ Elizabeth Rubin recounted how one Taliban commander, Mullah Razayar Nurzai, described some of these attacks:

⁵¹ Annex I: List of Incidents in Helmand Province, "Helmand at War," Senlis Council Report, 2 June 2006.

⁵² Bishop, *3PARA*, 53, 151.

⁵³ Sean Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone: The Real Story from the Frontline in Afghanistan* (London: Constable, 2008), 45–47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Bishop, *3PARA*, 56, 60.

⁵⁶ National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

⁵⁷ "In the Dark," *The Economist*, 2 February 2008: 49. Waliullah Rahmani, "Helmand Province and the Afghan Insurgency," *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 6, 23 March 2006. Online at www.jamestown.org (accessed September 2008).

⁵⁸ "Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008," Senlis Council Report, February 2008: 97.

A few days earlier, Nurzai and his men had attacked Amir Dado's extended family. First, he told me, they shot dead his brother—a former district leader. Then the next day, as members of Dado's family were driving to the site of the first attack, Nurzai's men ambushed their convoy. Boys, cousins, uncles: all were killed.⁵⁹

Rubin later witnessed Taliban in Pakistan celebrating one attack intended for Dad Mohammed himself.⁶⁰ A woman who fled to Lashkar Gah said, "The Taliban were stronger and we couldn't defeat them. The foreigners would later come and bombard the villages. I had to protect my children and family so we fled here."⁶¹ Fifty-two policemen perished in fighting around Sangin during the first 6 months of 2006.⁶² Many residents of Sangin fled to Lashkar Gah. Houses and the bazaar were destroyed. The remaining elders kicked out the police chief.⁶³

Militias and ANP fought to the end in northern Helmand, to little avail. The result of all these attacks was that by the summer the police were either overrun or left beleaguered in the district centers. Seven district police chiefs had been killed.⁶⁴ Suicide bombers had blown themselves up in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah (one killed the former Helmand police chief and wounded scores of civilians). In Gereshk, the other major population center, the Taliban walked openly on the roads. "Spies" had been publicly hanged. The ring road from Lashkar Gah to Kandahar could only be driven in the daytime. Other roads were blocked entirely by Taliban checkpoints. Nowzad, Dishu, Musa Qala, and Kajaki were said to be largely under Taliban control. The police did nothing.⁶⁵

The Shattered State

Roughly 350 civilians and police were killed in Kandahar in the first six months of 2006 compared to roughly 200 in the last six months of 2005. In Helmand, it was the same story: roughly 270 compared to 160.⁶⁶ The government's ability to stand against a resurgent Taliban was in question. The misrule of the past four years had left the government unable to rally enough support to defeat the Taliban. To counter this situation, the Coalition reinforced the south. The arrival of the British prevented the Taliban from completely defeating government forces in Helmand. In Kandahar, the Taliban offensive had never really threatened Kandahar city but the arrival of Canadians helped prevent the situation from getting worse. The British and Canadian presence was proof that the war had escalated. The Taliban had shattered government authority in the south and had opened a full-fledged guerrilla war.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Rubin, "In the Land of the Taliban," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 2006.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008," Senlis Council Report, February 2008: 97.

⁶² Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 179.

⁶³ Bishop, *3PARA*, 108.

⁶⁴ National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed November 2008.

⁶⁵ "Helmand at War," Senlis Council, 2 June 2006. "Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008," Senlis Council Report, February 2008, 107. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 61, 180.

⁶⁶ National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed November 2008.

The War in Southern Afghanistan, 2006–2008

Over the first half of 2006 British, Canadian, Dutch, and Australian forces flowed into southern Afghanistan. Their presence changed the face of the war in the south. The Taliban had to confront a major new opponent that they could not overwhelm as they had the Afghan National Police.

Violence escalated dramatically. The fighting bore great meaning for the British and Canadian nations. Musa Qala, Pashmul, and Sangin ring in Canadian and British ears the same way that Fallujah, Ramadi, and Tal Afar ring in American ears. Southern Afghanistan became the heart of the war—the place where the Taliban enjoyed the greatest power and the government the least. No other front in Afghanistan mattered as much. The fate of the new Afghan state hung in the balance. It could hardly survive without Kandahar city—the heart of the Pashtun ruling class—and the agriculture of the Helmand River Valley.

From 2006 to 2009, the Coalition kept the government of Afghanistan afloat but did not defeat the Taliban. This section looks at the period from 2006 to 2009 and tries to answer why the Coalition and government of Afghanistan could not defeat the Taliban. The key points are:

- The Afghan government failed to rule fairly or justly, creating sympathy for the Taliban. Even in areas that the Coalition controlled, the government often could not win over the population.
- The Coalition suffered from a scarcity of forces that prevented much of the population from being secured.
- The Coalition learned counterinsurgency slowly, meaning that the forces that were available were often employed in a sub-optimal fashion.

Overall, a variety of decisions could have been made differently by Coalition governments, Coalition military commanders, and the Afghan government. Different decisions might not have defeated the Taliban altogether but they could have led to a better situation today.

Hardest Fighting since Korea, February to December 2006

On 8 December 2005, NATO foreign ministers finalized a plan to send British, Canadian, Dutch, and Australian forces to southern Afghanistan. The idea was to place a more robust footprint in the south—the Pashtun heartland—in order to counter resurgent Taliban activity. The Canadians sent 2,200 men to Kandahar, the British sent 3,300 men to Helmand, the Dutch sent 1,300 to Uruzgan, and the Australians sent 700 to Uruzgan (to fight alongside the Dutch).

The British, Canadian, and Dutch commands nominally fell under Regional Command South. The commander of Regional Command South rotated every six months, shifting between the Canadians, Dutch, and British. Canada had the first go, with Brigadier-General David Fraser taking command. While Fraser ostensibly commanded all of the forces in the south, in actuality each national contingent received instructions from its own government. Fraser had no authority to overrule those instructions.

During the first half of 2006, Regional Command South itself fell under CJTF-76, the US divisional command in Afghanistan (10th Mountain Division), led by Major General Benjamin Freakley. ISAF would take over Regional Command South in August. General David Richards, an experienced and polished British officer, well schooled in counterinsurgency, commanded ISAF.

Canadians in Kandahar

The first Canadian force to arrive was their provincial reconstruction team (PRT), in August 2005. The Canadian military contingent, Task Force Kandahar, arrived in February 2006, replacing the US battalion (2-503rd Airborne) then operating in Kandahar. Brigadier-General David Fraser (who also headed Regional Command South) commanded Task Force Kandahar. The task force was built around the thousand men of 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, under Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope.

With extensive experience in Bosnia since the 1990s, the Canadians intended to implement good counterinsurgency techniques. Their commanders emphasized winning hearts and minds and fighting a three-block war (conducting humanitarian assistance, peace support operations, and high-intensity combat within a small area).⁶⁷

The task force deployed into Kandahar city. Permanent garrisons were set up there and at Spin Boldak on the border, and in the mountains 200 kilometers north of Kandahar city at El Bak. One brigade from the 205th Corps of the Afghan National Army deployed with the Canadians into the province.

The main Canadian military forces in Kandahar city sallied forth for multi-day missions into rural districts. The idea was to show the people that the government was in control. The Canadians focused these missions along the ring road, particularly just west of Kandahar in Zharey and Panjwai. The area became known as “ambush alley.”⁶⁸ They also conducted missions into Taliban sanctuaries in northern Kandahar, such as Operation Peacemaker in Shah Wali Kot district in northern Kandahar in April.⁶⁹ In Gumbad, a town in the mountains of Shah Wali Kot, the Canadians, along with the Afghan National Army, occupied a permanent patrol base set up by US forces in October of the previous year.⁷⁰ As the fighting intensified and the Taliban laid increasingly powerful IEDs on the roads into the mountains, Canadian forces abandoned the Gumbad patrol base, as well as another base nearby called FOB Martello. The bases had become too difficult to reinforce and resupply.⁷¹

The Canadian PRT focused on furthering good governance, economic development, and reform of the police forces in order to reduce violence in the province. Like most PRTs, it was a mix of civilian diplomats and aid personnel from the Canadian International Development Agency and military personnel—except bigger. Whereas US PRTs fielded 80 to 100 personnel (2–3 civilians), the Canadian variant fielded 300 (20 civilians).

⁶⁷ Adnan Khan, “Canada’s Kandahar Balancing Act,” *Maclean’s*, 2 April 2006.

⁶⁸ Adnan Khan, “The View from Ambush Alley,” *Maclean’s*, 11 September 2006.

⁶⁹ Adnan Khan, “Canada’s Kandahar Balancing Act,” *Maclean’s*, 2 April 2006.

⁷⁰ Les Perreux, “Princess Pats embark on dangerous mission,” *Daily Globe and Mail*, 9 March 2006.

⁷¹ Discussion with members of Task Force Kandahar, Kandahar Airfield, 7 December 2008.

The Canadians intended the PRT to be their main effort; the military forces would be the shield that enabled them to operate.⁷² The Canadian PRT focused on helping with the development of the Afghan National Police and the National Solidarity Program. Royal Canadian Mounted Police and military police attached to the PRT worked with the Afghan National Police. They tried to counter corruption and professionalize conduct. Seven new police stations were built, new equipment and 13 vehicles were purchased, and repairs were made to existing structures. The National Solidarity Program was an Afghan government program that gave grants to villages to conduct small-scale projects. The Canadian International Development Agency worked with the program and provided money for the grants.⁷³ It was a way of building Afghan capacity. Other projects were conducted as well, particularly around Kandahar city. Unfortunately, as fighting escalated, the PRT got out less and less, especially after the death of Glyn Berry (civilian PRT lead) in January 2006 led to the evacuation of the civilians on staff.⁷⁴ By mid-2006, it was clear that the Canadian main effort was actually their military forces.

Stretched Out in Helmand

The British contingent—the 16th Air Assault Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Ed Butler—started arriving in February.⁷⁵ The bulk were in place and ready to start operating by May. Unfortunately, the “brigade” had only one battalion (3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment) instead of the 3 standard for most brigades. Third Battalion, the Parachute Regiment (3rd Para), under Lieutenant-Colonel Stuart Tootal, was augmented by an assortment of detachments from other units: a platoon from 1st Battalion, the Royal Irish Rangers; a company from 2nd Battalion, the Royal Gurkha Rifles; a squadron from the Household Cavalry Regiment; and seven 105mm guns of the 7th Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery. Even so, they hardly made for enough boots on the ground to secure the population.

The British also took over the provincial reconstruction team headquartered in Lashkar Gah. Robustly staffed with 30 civilians from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development (DfID), as well as a military component, the provincial reconstruction team guided economic development and efforts to engage local leaders.

British commanders from Butler on down heavily emphasized the need to work with the people and win hearts and minds. The men and officers of 16th Air Assault Brigade had carefully studied the lessons of British operations in Malaya before deploying. They did not

⁷² Presentation by Lee Windsor, Emerald Express Conference, Marine Corps University, 9 April 2009.

⁷³ Lee Windsor, David Charters, and Brent Wilson, *Kandahar Tour* (Mississauga: John Wiley & Sons Canada, 2008), 39.

⁷⁴ Peter Pigott, *Canada in Afghanistan* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 136–137, 142, 150.

⁷⁵ Butler started out in an odd position outside the regional command south chain of command (which gave orders directly to 3rd Para) but responsible for coordinating with the British government. This arrangement was rectified in August when he took charge of Task Force Helmand, below Regional Command South and above 3rd Para.

want to be heavy-handed, and poppy eradication was de-emphasized in order to avoid upsetting the local population.⁷⁶

Securing the population was the first priority. Following good counterinsurgency practice, Butler planned to concentrate his forces in the center of the province around Camp Bastion, Lashkar Gah (the provincial capital), and Gereshk, and then oil spot outward.⁷⁷ A large percentage of the population and the best agricultural land lay in this area. In February, Royal Engineers started constructing the main British base, known as Camp Bastion, along the ring road in the center of the province.

The British also committed men from 7th Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery (who also still had to man their guns) to 8-man operational mentoring liaison teams (OMLTs). OMLTs advised the 3rd Brigade, 205th Afghan National Army Corps, which reinforced Helmand along with the British. Tootal and Butler hoped that the ANA could help provide the boots on the ground for the oil spot to spread northward and southward. The 205th ANA Brigade had three battalions (later raised to four), known as *kandaks*.⁷⁸

This plan did not survive first contact. The Taliban offensive against the Afghan government forced the British to disperse their forces into outlying areas. In the aftermath of the operation to save the police in May, the British kept a platoon at the Musa Qala district center. A Gurkha platoon was also placed in Nowzad because of insurgent activity.⁷⁹

Governor Mohammed Daoud wanted these and other district centers secured. Karzai weighed in on Daoud's side. Butler argued against Governor Daoud but eventually agreed in order to support the provincial government. Forces went into Nowzad, Musa Qala, Kajaki (overlooking the strategic Kajaki Dam), and Sangin, all north of Gereshk. Thus ended the British oil spot approach.⁸⁰

To cover each town, Butler could only commit a platoon or, in the case of Sangin, a company. The platoons took position in district centers or fortified posts—later known as “platoon houses.” Alone and unafraid, the platoon houses became targets for the Taliban. Some of the worst fighting of the war followed.

The British went into Sangin in June. The May fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan National Police (ANP) had been so fierce that Tootal decided to commit an entire company to reinforce the 20 surviving police (who had no police chief). Set up at the district center, the Paras confronted rolling Taliban attacks—five per day on average.⁸¹ Heavy use of close air support was required to beat back the Taliban.⁸² Demoralized and unwilling to patrol in

⁷⁶ Patrick Bishop, *3PARA* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 34–35; Warren Chin, "British Counter-Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Defence & Security Analysis*, vol. 23, no. 2 (June 2007): 203.

⁷⁷ Sean Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone: The Real Story from the Frontline in Afghanistan* (London: Constable, 2008), 44.

⁷⁸ Bishop, *3PARA*, 51.

⁷⁹ Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone*, 50.

⁸⁰ Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone*, 63–64. Discussion with Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 24 October 2008.

⁸¹ Rayment, *The Killing Zone*, 65, 70.

⁸² Discussion with British officers, Joint Service Command Staff College, Shrivenham, 20 October 2008.

the first place, the 20 police disintegrated. Tribal elders readily admitted to Daoud and Tootal that the Taliban controlled the town.⁸³

The situation was not much better in Nowzad, Musa Qala, or Kajaki. To take one example, in Nowzad, a cordon and search mission in June (Operation Mutay) encountered prepared Taliban defenses. In July, the Taliban started attacking the Gurkha and ANA platoon house at the district center. These were coordinated large-scale attacks, in which as many as 100 Taliban actually attempted to breach the platoon house. The 40 Gurkhas held but the population fled and large portions of the town were destroyed. Haji Mohammed Anwar Ishaqzai, parliament member from Nowzad, said: “The situation is out of control, Most of the people have left Nowzad. The only people who are left don’t have the money or the resources to go to a safer place.”⁸⁴ The police remained but the Gurkhas deemed them untrustworthy.⁸⁵ So did Haji Mohammed Anwar: “During the day, they are policemen. During the night, they are thieves.”⁸⁶

Lack of helicopters worsened the situation. The British had nowhere near the number of ground forces needed to secure the supply routes to all the bases and platoon houses. Therefore, re-supply and casualty evacuation had to be done by air. Unfortunately, the British had only seven CH-47 Chinook helicopters. This naturally limited the amount of food and ammunition any unit could stock. Nor was casualty evacuation guaranteed. The intensity of the fire sometimes prevented helicopters from landing to evacuate wounded. The British had to be careful not to lose any helicopters. A single loss would make the prospects of timely casualty evacuation even worse.

Table 5) Coalition forces in Helmand, 2006–2008

Formation	Battalions*	Number of forces	Time period
16th Air Assault Brigade	1 (3rd Para)	3,300	March-September 2006
3rd Commando Brigade	2	4,500	October 2006–April 2007
12th Mechanized Brigade	4**	5,800	April–September 2007
52nd Lowland Brigade	4	5,800	September 2007–March 2008
16th Air Assault Brigade	5	8,000	February–August 2008
24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU)	1 (1/6)	2,300	April–December 2008
3rd Commando Brigade	5	8,000	September 2008–April 2009

*The British call their deployed battalions and their attachments “battle groups,” similar to how the Marine Corps calls regiments in the field with all their attachments, “regimental combat teams.”

**One battalion was dedicated to being an Operational Mentoring Liaison Team (OMLT).

⁸³ Rayment, *The Killing Zone*, 95. Patrick Bishop, *3PARA* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 115, 132, 211.

⁸⁴ Geoff Witte, “Epicenter emerging in Afghan war,” *The Washington Post*, 15 March 2007.

⁸⁵ Tom Coghlan, “Gurkha spirit triumphs in siege of Nawzad,” *Daily Telegraph*, 6 October 2006. Bishop, *3Para*, 187, 192.

⁸⁶ Griff Witte, “Epicenter emerging in Afghan war,” *The Washington Post* 15 March 2007.

Operation Mountain Thrust

As British and Canadian positions were being set up in Kandahar and Helmand, the Coalition launched Operation Mountain Thrust, a set of search and destroy missions in Kandahar, Zabul, Uruzgan, and Helmand.⁸⁷ Each mission was meant to capture an insurgent leader or disrupt an insurgent sanctuary. Mountain Thrust went on for 6 weeks in June and July. Canadians, British, and Americans all took part. Second Battalion, Eighty-Seventh US Infantry Regiment came down from regional command east to take part. Major General Benjamin Freakley, commander of Combined Joint Task Force 76, the major US command in Afghanistan, commanded the operation. Freakley disliked holding and building, preferring to strike at Taliban leadership and sanctuaries.⁸⁸ In his words, “by disrupting the Taliban’s command chain and killing and capturing the core leaders and fighters we will [persuade] the less committed that there are better alternatives than supporting the insurgents.”⁸⁹ In the operation itself, company- to battalion-size units attacked Taliban sanctuaries, cleared them, and then pulled back. Nowhere did forces stay. Needless to say, Mountain Thrust had little effect on the Taliban’s influence over the population.

Table 6) Key events in southern Afghanistan in 2006

Event	Date	Location
Canadians arrive	February 2006	Kandahar
British arrive	February 2006	Helmand
Defense of Nowzad	June-July 2006	Nowzad, Helmand
Operation Mountain Thrust	June-July 2006	Northern Kandahar
Operation Medusa	September 2006	Panjwai and Zharey, Kandahar
Defense of Musa Qala & Sangin	September 2006	Musa Qala and Sangin, Helmand
Musa Qala cease-fire	October 2006	Musa Qala, Helmand
Operation Boaz Tsuka	December 2006	Panjwai and Zharey, Kandahar

Operation Medusa

In Kandahar, the Taliban controlled critical districts along the ring road—Zharey, Panjwai, and Maiwand. From Panjwai, they could infiltrate into Kandahar city itself. Following the police expedition into Zharey and Panjwai in the spring of 2006, the Canadians conducted a series of raids into the two districts; six against Pashmul alone. All met fierce resistance, often facing over 100 insurgents.⁹⁰ One firefight in July lasted for 60 hours. Another in August cost the Canadians 14 casualties. The worst part of these raids was that the Canadians lacked the forces to hold what they had cleared so the area could never be permanently secured.⁹¹

When intelligence reported that the Taliban might be massing in Panjwai for an attack on Kandahar, Brigadier Fraser planned a more robust operation—Operation Medusa. Its

⁸⁷ Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos*, 359.

⁸⁸ “Operation Mountain Thrust Continues Momentum in Afghanistan,” American Foreign Press Service, 19 June 2008. Bishop, *3PARA*, 201.

⁸⁹ Patrick Bishop, *3PARA*, 171.

⁹⁰ Kenneth Finlayson and Alan Meyer, “Operation Medusa,” *Special Forces Magazine*, Spring 2008, 19, 20.

⁹¹ Adnan Khan, “The View from Ambush Alley,” *Macleans*, 11 September 2006. Greg Grant, “Tribal War,” *Government Executive*, vol. 39, no. 3 (March 2007): 44.

objective was to open up the ring road, disrupt any attack, and clean out the Taliban base in Pashmul. One Canadian battalion (from the Royal Canadian Regiment), 6 US Special Forces teams from Task Force 31, and 5 Afghan National Army companies (roughly 30 men each) took part. Medusa was Canada's largest combat operation since the Korean War. Governor Asadullah warned the population so that they could clear out. Entrenched, roughly 1,000 Taliban mounted well-coordinated ambushes and fought the Canadians, Afghan National Army, and US Special Forces compound to compound.⁹² In the words of one Taliban fighter, "it was very strong fighting for 17 days. It shook the whole world. This shows that the Canadians are strong fighters and that we fought strongly against them."⁹³ By mid September, the Coalition (including a company of reinforcements from the 10th Mountain Division) had succeeded in clearing out the Taliban. An estimated 1,000 insurgents had been killed.⁹⁴

The Canadians left two new patrol posts in place in order to hold what had been cleared. Follow-up efforts also included a USAID-funded road construction project and efforts to train the police. Unfortunately, two posts were not enough to prevent continued Taliban activity. Also, the government did little to win over the people (largely Noorzai), giving them no reason to stop fighting. By October, the Taliban had returned in force and attacks resumed.⁹⁵ In December the Canadians went into Panjwai again, in Operation Boaz Tsuka. Having learned their lesson from the earlier Pashmul operation, insurgents did not stay and fight. Rather than depart immediately, the Canadians tried to build what had been cleared. Humanitarian assistance and quick-impact projects demonstrated goodwill to the population. Fortified checkpoints were constructed for the police. In the end, though, the Canadians could not stay permanently. Once more, the Taliban returned after the Coalition had left.⁹⁶

Musa Qala: the Afghan Fallujah

The fighting in 2006 culminated in Helmand. The troopers of 3rd Para had been fighting hard for three months. Platoon houses were beleaguered; cut off and dependent on helicopters for re-supply. Take Sangin. The situation had never improved. The company of Paras occupying the Sangin district center remained surrounded and under frequent attack. Governor Daoud reinforced the center with new police from outside Sangin but they, like their predecessors, deserted in short order. The biggest problem was being cut off. All supplies came in from the air, but since mid-July ground fire had made helicopter re-supply impossible. Supplies were then air-dropped, but this was an imperfect method. Only an

⁹² Kenneth Finlayson and Alan Meyer, "Operation Medusa," *Special Forces Magazine*, Spring 2008, 19, 20, 21.

⁹³ Graeme Smith, "Talking to the Taliban," <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/talkingtothetaliban/>, accessed 1 February 2009.

⁹⁴ Harjit Sajjon, "How the Taliban Gained a Foothold in Southern Afghanistan in 2006," Presentation to the Center for a New American Security, 4 December 2008. Greg Grant, "Tribal War," *Government Executive*, vol. 39, no. 3 (March 2007): 44.

⁹⁵ Sajjon, "How the Taliban Gained a Foothold in Southern Afghanistan in 2006." Grant, "Tribal War," 44. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 197. General David Richards, Defense Department News Briefing, LDCH Political Transcripts, 17 October 2006.

⁹⁶ Kenneth Finlayson, "Operation Baaz Tsuka: Task Force 31 Returns to the Panjwayi," *Veritas*, vol. 4, no. 1 (March 2008): 15–24.

emergency resupply operation by Canadian light-armored vehicles saved the company from running out of food and water.⁹⁷

The situation was worse in Musa Qala. Tootal could only commit two platoons to secure Musa Qala, Helmand's third largest district. Fighting was intense. In one attack, 150 Taliban fell upon the district center. In another, they knocked out one of the center's two .50-caliber machine guns. The British often called in air strikes within 30 meters of their positions.⁹⁸ Resupplying the outpost was difficult and hence infrequent. Helicopters could not land without serious risk of getting shot down. As in Sangin, the British ran short of ammunition and rations. Relief columns had to fight their way in on 21 July and 1 August. Later in August, a full-scale battalion-level operation had to be mounted—replete with a Canadian LAV detachment—just to rotate the Musa Qala garrison.

Most of the population fled. The police chief and his seventy police departed as well. Non-Pashtun replacements from the north showed more aggressiveness, but their presence only underscored local antipathy toward the government and the British.⁹⁹ One tribal elder later said: “Most of the fighters weren't real Taliban... There were some outsiders, but most were local men who were angry with the Government, its robbery and corruption, who were persuaded to fight by our preachers in the mosques.”¹⁰⁰

From August onward, Butler and other British officers seriously considered pulling out of Musa Qala. No reinforcements could be found and casualties were mounting (8 men were killed from July to September). Many, including Richards, realized that withdrawal could embolden the Taliban and push more Afghans into their camp. Yet staying on appeared prohibitively costly in men and materiel.¹⁰¹

Before any decision was made, local Alizai tribal elders, who had grown tired of the fighting, stepped forward to propose a cease-fire between the Taliban and the British. Haji Shah Agha led them. If the British withdrew, the elders promised to form a militia to protect the town and keep out the Taliban. Governor Daoud conveyed their proposal to the British on 12 September. Butler agreed to a tentative cease-fire and negotiations ensued the next day. Butler saw the cease-fire as a means of empowering the tribal elders against the Taliban by allowing them to regain dominance over Musa Qala. Backed by Richards, he demanded 30 days of peace before his forces would withdraw. Governor Daoud spoke to the elders and they agreed. They kept their word. No attacks occurred for 30 days. How the elders made this happen is unclear. Perhaps combat had tired the Taliban too.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 197. Bishop, *3Para*, 211.

⁹⁸ Rayment, *The Killing Zone*, 123. The Canadian Army used LAVs to mechanize its infantry battalions. This detachment was from Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

⁹⁹ Tom Coghlan, “Paras almost retreated under Taliban assault,” *Daily Telegraph*, 3 October 2006. Bishop, *3PARA*, 167, 235, 238, 240, 251–252.

¹⁰⁰ Anthony Loyd and Tahir Luddin, “After the fighting and dying, the Taleban return as British depart,” *The Times*, 30 October 2006.

¹⁰¹ Coghlan, “Paras almost retreated under Taliban assault.” Bishop, *3PARA*, 167, 235, 238, 240, 251–252.

¹⁰² Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 212. Bishop, *3PARA*, 257–260.

Whatever the case, on 17 October, the British trucked out of Musa Qala, their security guaranteed by the tribal elders. A sixty-man militia manned by the elders' tribesmen replaced them. Daoud chose their chief, Mullah Malang.¹⁰³

At first, the agreed-upon cease-fire held.¹⁰⁴ The British were under no illusions. They knew that the town would soon fall under the Taliban; a great propaganda victory for them.¹⁰⁵ American officers, remembering Fallujah, expected the same and therefore heavily criticized the cease-fire. And fall it did. In February 2007, Taliban fighters led by Mullah Ghafoor marched into Musa Qala and drove out the elders, killing Haji Shah Agha in the process. The town became an insurgent sanctuary with armed Taliban fighters openly controlling the streets. Insurgents operating out of Musa Qala stepped up the pressure on Sangin and other areas farther south. An insurgent sanctuary fostered partly by unsustainable cease-fire, Musa Qala lives in infamy as the British Fallujah.

It was an ominous ending to a tough year. Des Brown, the British Minister of Defence, called Musa Qala "iconic."¹⁰⁶ All the fighting since May could be described as iconic, dwarfing in scale and length anything yet seen in Afghanistan and anything experienced by the British Army or the Canadian Army since the Korean War.¹⁰⁷ The other elements of counterinsurgency—governance and economic development—had been side-tracked. DfID reduced their presence because of the security situation. A handful of quick impact projects had been completed, police reform had not even started, district government outside Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, and Nad Ali had disintegrated. The best that could be said was that Lashkar Gah, Kandahar, and critical surrounding terrain remained outside Taliban control. Preventing all-out Taliban success in the south is the great contribution that the Coalition made to Afghanistan in 2006.

Stemming the Tide, 2007–2008

Over the next two years, the Coalition tried to regain ground. They brought forward reinforcements and improved their counterinsurgency techniques. The toughest obstacle remained government misrule. The Coalition could clear and even hold but in many areas the people remained opposed to the government, offering the Taliban ample opportunity to continue living amongst the people.

Taliban Governance

The Taliban now held large swathes of territory. The government controlled little between Gereshk in Helmand and Arghandab district in Kandahar. West of the Helmand River and south of Garmser also largely fell to the Taliban. North of Sangin lay just isolated outposts. The Taliban leader in Musa Qala claimed to control 5 districts (except for the district centers). Whether this was true or not, the reality was that Canadian, British, and Afghan

¹⁰³ Bishop, *3PARA*, 260.

¹⁰⁴ Tom Coghlan, "Paras almost retreated under Taliban assault," *Daily Telegraph*, 3 October 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Discussion with British officers, Joint Service Command Staff College, Shrivenham, 20 October 2008.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Donnelly and Gary Schmitt, "Musa Qala: Adapting to the Realities of Modern Counterinsurgency," www.smallwarsjournal.com, 2008. Accessed October 2008. Bishop, *3PARA*, 267.

¹⁰⁷ In all, 3rd Para suffered 15 killed and 46 wounded.

government's influence usually extended little farther than the district centers.¹⁰⁸ In Uruzgan, the situation was no better. The Dutch and Australians estimated that the Taliban controlled 60–80 percent of the province; former governor Jan Mohammed admitted that they had the support of the people.¹⁰⁹

Notoriously, the Taliban began to set up a shadow government. Provincial governors and district governors were appointed.¹¹⁰ Taliban leaders, mullahs, and tribal elders were given authority to resolve disputes. Criminals were prosecuted; justice was meted out quickly. The shadow government, unsurprisingly, was strongest in Musa Qala (indeed the term “shadow government” for Musa Qala is probably a misnomer). A district governor, chief of police, and Shari'a courts were all established.

The Taliban took care to win the hearts and minds of the people. They did not ruthlessly intimidate. They executed those guilty of crimes (such as the men hanged in Musa Qala, Sangin, and Gereshk for “spying”) but, in general, tried not to harm civilians who did not side with the government.¹¹¹ The Taliban often warned civilians of an impending attack, to give them time to clear out. It was unusual for civilians to pass this information to government or Coalition forces.

Nor did they revert to the ways of the old Taliban and strictly institute Islamic law. Some secular practices were permitted. Men were allowed to shave their beards. Movies were not prohibited. The sick could go to clinics and boys could go to school. There were some reports that girls were allowed to go to school, though other reports said the contrary.¹¹² This was not all. The Taliban provided certain goods and services to the locals, such as food drops. In some districts, they set up madrassas (and possibly even clinics).¹¹³

By several accounts, the people appreciated the relative security and order the Taliban provided. The Taliban gained a reputation for opposing corruption and enforcing order.¹¹⁴ One man from Musa Qala said: “The Taliban didn't have anything to do with the people, only with their enemy. They didn't hurt people and everyone had a job.”¹¹⁵ A villager from Sangin said: “The Taliban have a very organized structure. The current governor for Sangin is Mullah Abdul Ali Akhund, before him it was Mullah Torjan Akhund...Afghan National Police are treating the local people very badly, but the Taliban are in a very good relationship with them. When there is a dispute between people in the village they don't come to the

¹⁰⁸ Aziz Ahmad Tassal, “Musa Qala: The Shape of Things to Come?”, Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 27 November 2007.

¹⁰⁹ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 30.

¹¹⁰ Mullah Mohammad Rahim was the shadow governor of Helmand. Abdul Rahim was the shadow governor of Farah. *Helmand*, Provincial Handbook, IDS International, October 2008, 41.

¹¹¹ Discussion with British officers, King's College London, 23 October 2008. “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008, 99.

¹¹² Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 72. Discussion with Dr Patrick Porter, Joint Service Command and Staff College, 21 October 2008.

¹¹³ Discussion with British officers, King's College London, 23 October 2008. Discussion with 2/7, Twenty-Nine Palms, 23 February 2009. “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008, 108.

¹¹⁴ Discussion with Dr Patrick Porter, Joint Service Command and Staff College, 21 October 2008. Aziz Ahmad Tassal, “Winning Hearts and Minds,” Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 27 November 2007.

¹¹⁵ “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008, 108.

government authorities...they go to the Taliban governor and judicial system to solve their problem.”¹¹⁶

Overall, the Taliban worked within the tribal system. Mullah Dadullah shared resources and political power with the tribal elders in the south.¹¹⁷ Tribal elders were allowed to settle certain types of disputes and the Taliban tried to reach decisions related to governance via traditional jirgas. A tribal elder in Helmand described this relationship: “We in the tribal shura council deal with personal and tribal conflicts. The religious scholars rule on matters pertaining to religion. We maintain close coordination with the Taliban, and they give us whatever we want.”¹¹⁸

Local communities supported the Taliban through donations known as *zakat*. Families gave different amounts. Taliban fighters state that the amount ranged from \$2 to \$600 per year.¹¹⁹ *Zakat* may have been coerced. The Taliban made additional money through taxation of the poppy trade and, of course, trading the poppy themselves and processing it into opium. Over 150 opium processing plants were established in Musa Qala.¹²⁰ The Taliban also taxed other commodities, such as wheat, electricity, and trucks carrying all manner of goods.

Clearing and Holding

The Canadian and British governments recognized the need for reinforcements. In late 2006, the Canadians deployed a squadron (a company-level unit) of Leopard main battle tanks. By the middle of 2007, 2,500 Canadians (up from 2,200) operated in Kandahar. The British started reinforcing Helmand in the summer of 2006. Further reinforcements in the first half of 2007 brought British numbers in the south to nearly 6,000, almost double the year before.¹²¹

Reinforcements and consolidation (because of the withdrawal from Musa Qala) allowed the British to reinforce platoon houses and form a handful of small “mobile outreach groups” to patrol rural areas.¹²²

With greater flexibility, the British made a big push to clear and hold Sangin. Violence had been heavy there since May 2006. Brigadier Jerry Thomas, commander of the 3rd Commando Brigade (the 16th Air Assault Brigade had departed in October 2006), planned the operation. The goal was to clear the town, hold it, and then re-establish the government there. Over one thousand men took part, including the British 42nd Royal Marine Commando and three companies from the US 82nd Airborne Division.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁷ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 119.

¹¹⁸ “The neo-Taliban,” Al Jazeera Television Documentary, Middle Easter Media Research Institute, Clip No 1508, 5 July 2007.

¹¹⁹ Graeme Smith, “Talking to the Taliban.”

¹²⁰ Discussion with Brigadier MacKay, DCDC, Shrivenham, 21 October 2008. Discussion with British officers, King’s College London, 23 October 2008.

¹²¹ The British government had actually decided in July 2006 to send 900 more men to 16th Air Assault Brigade. Another 1,000 were added in January 2007.

¹²² Discussion with British officers, Joint Service Command Staff College, Shrivenham, 20 October 2008.

The operation kicked off on 2 April following a series of air strikes. It encountered only sporadic resistance.¹²³ After Sangin was cleared, more ANA took post, a new patrol base (FOB Inkerman) was built north of town, reconstruction started, and the police were re-established. USAID and MRRD contributed to the reconstruction activity. People slowly began to return. By the end of 2007 the bazaar was up and running again.¹²⁴ There was a steady increase in calls by civilians reporting insurgent positions and IEDs.¹²⁵

The long-term results of the Sangin operation were mixed. The Taliban no longer controlled the town, but they had not been entirely driven out. The cultivated areas surrounding the town remained contested even though the British started pressing outposts into that area and focused quick-impact projects along the river from Lashkar Gah, to Gereshk, to Sangin.

The Canadians tried to clear and hold as well. In early 2007, Canadian military forces moved out to a variety of rural areas, including Arghandab.¹²⁶ Operations into Zharey and Panjwai continued. Holding was the hard part. Often scarcity of forces prevented the establishment of permanent positions.¹²⁷ Infighting between Afghan security forces did not help. The Taliban and Canadians pushed back and forth, trying to control the area. In the spring of 2007, the Canadians managed to establish another permanent outpost in Panjwai, near the district center.¹²⁸

During all this fighting, the Taliban changed their tactics. The prior year, 2006, had been a bloody one (some elders attested that the Taliban had taken severe punishment).¹²⁹ The Taliban conducted fewer large-scale assaults in 2007. Attacks by 5–6 insurgents became more common than attacks by 30–40.¹³⁰ Insurgents still gathered in large numbers but attacks tended to occur at stand-off distances. Taliban now rarely tried to assault a British or Canadian position. The police were not so fortunate. Isolated police outposts on the desert fringe west of Lashkar Gah were frequent targets.¹³¹

Additionally, insurgents turned increasingly to IEDs and suicide car bombs. Between 2006 and 2008, IED incidents increased 400 percent.¹³² The Taliban considered suicide bombs to be particularly effective. Camps were set up in Pakistan to train suicide bombers.¹³³ The trainees were Afghans, Arabs, and other Muslims. In the words of one Taliban fighter, “Against non-Muslims it [suicide bombing] is very good because they can stop any kind of attack but not these kinds of attacks.”¹³⁴

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Discussion with Brigadier MacKay, DCDC, 21 October 2008.

¹²⁵ Discussion with Major Dan Cheesman and Captain Matt Lewis, B Company, 40 Commando, Royal Marines, Taunton, UK, 21 October 2008.

¹²⁶ Presentation by Lee Windsor, Emerald Express Conference, Marine Corps University, 9 April 2009.

¹²⁷ Sean Maloney, “A violent impediment: the evolution of insurgent operations in Kandahar province 2003–07,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 213.

¹²⁸ *Kandahar Provincial Handbook*, (Arlington, Virg.: IDS International, 2008), 63–64.

¹²⁹ “War without end,” *The Economist* (27 October 2007): 50.

¹³⁰ Discussion with British officers, King’s College, London, 23 October 2008.

¹³¹ Discussion with British officers, Joint Service Command Staff College, Shrivenham, 20 October 2008.

¹³² Discussion with British officers, King’s College, London, 23 October 2008.

¹³³ “The neo-Taliban,” Al Jazeera Television Documentary, Middle Easter Media Research Institute, Clip No 1508, 5 July 2007.

¹³⁴ Graeme Smith, “Talking to the Taliban.”

Afghan Security Forces

Clear, hold, and build was not the only improvement in counterinsurgency. The Coalition also intensified training and advising of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police. The commander of Regional Command South during the first half of 2007—British Major-General Jacko Page—considered development of Afghan security forces to be his main effort.

Afghan National Army

The Afghan National Army (ANA) was a diversified national army, designed to be loyal to the country of Afghanistan rather than to local warlords. Its men were recruited from throughout Afghanistan and its units were not locally based. Thus, ANA serving in the south could be Tajik, Hazara, or Pashtun. Unlike the locally recruited police, the ANA existed outside local tribal dynamics—allowing it to be relatively objective and unaffected by conflicting loyalties. On the other hand, many Pashtuns in the south looked on the mostly Dari-speaking ANA as a foreign force.¹³⁵

The 205th Corps was headquartered in Kandahar city. The Corps contained 3 brigades. Each brigade contained 3 infantry kandaks (battalions), a combat support kandak (artillery battery, engineer company, and reconnaissance company), and a service support (logistics) kandak. Each infantry kandak officially fielded roughly 650 men in three rifle companies, a heavy weapons company, and a headquarters company. Actual numbers usually varied between 250 and 350.¹³⁶

The 1st Brigade operated in Kandahar province; the 2nd Brigade in Zabul; and the 3rd Brigade in Helmand. In addition to its three organic infantry kandaks, the 3rd Brigade used its combat support kandak as infantry and was reinforced by an additional kandak from the 201st Corps in Kabul.¹³⁷ The ANA in Helmand operated primarily in Gereshk, Kajaki, and Sangin. A kandak out of the 1st Brigade of the 207th Corps headquartered in Herat operated in Farah province, to the west of Helmand.

Training requirements prevented all of any Afghan National Army brigade from being employed at one time. Kandaks cycled through training, which took them out of the line. One kandak in any brigade was always in training.

To improve the capabilities of the ANA, the Coalition increased the number of operational mentoring liaison teams (OMLTs). In August 2006, the Canadians formed a 185-man OMLT to work with 1st Brigade of the 205th Corps. In Helmand, the British placed 200 advisors in 6 OMLTs with the 3rd Brigade. One OMLT worked with each of the kandaks. US Special Forces also advised the Afghan National Army. Several teams worked in Zabul, Uruzgan, and Kandahar. Other US advisory teams worked in Farah.

¹³⁵ Discussion with Captain Matthew Hurt, Kandahar Embedded Training Team leader, Ft Leavenworth, Kansas, 30 October 2008.

¹³⁶ This was partly due to the fact that soldiers regularly went home to deliver their pay. This took soldiers away for long periods.

¹³⁷ The brigade had 1,700 men in it overall.

Over time the Afghan National Army developed. They generally fought well. The 2nd Kandak of the 1st Brigade in Kandahar gained a particularly good fighting reputation.¹³⁸ The ANA's skill in collecting intelligence generally impressed the British and Canadians.¹³⁹ By 2008, they were patrolling and conducting intelligence-driven operations at the company level.¹⁴⁰ The population told the British and Canadians that they respected the ANA.¹⁴¹ In Sangin, they were seen as heroes compared to the rapacious and ineffective police. They patrolled frequently and engaged with the population; they also manned the checkpoints leading into Sangin, which the Taliban targeted relentlessly.¹⁴² Despite their greater vulnerability, they frequently moved ahead of US forces on joint patrols and offensive operations, and were the first to hit IEDs and ambushes, often taking heavy casualties.¹⁴³ They rarely retreated or hesitated to move ahead under heavy fire. Advisors considered the ANA soldiers to be brave and reliable fighters with a natural understanding of small unit tactics.¹⁴⁴

Despite these improvements, problems still existed in leadership, retention, administration, planning, and logistics.¹⁴⁵ The ANA did not have a well-developed NCO cadre, which hampered the development of disciplined, well-led units.¹⁴⁶ Insubordination and other command-and-control problems were frequent. The 205th Corps had a low retention rate because of the heavy fighting. Many preferred to serve nearer their homes in the north or east. ANA battalions and corps had little or no planning staff; US and NATO forces planned and led nearly all operations involving the ANA, including those by specially trained commandos. Their procurement and supply functions were often dysfunctional; it was not uncommon for officers to steal equipment and sell it for profit. The ANA was almost entirely dependent on US and NATO logistics, and had no MEDEVAC capability. All in all, the ANA was not able to function without substantial outside support.¹⁴⁷

Afghan National Police

The Afghan National Police (ANP) were the real challenge. The police had little in the way of weapons, training, or support—even though they functioned as a *de-facto* paramilitary

¹³⁸ Presentation by Lee Windsor, Emerald Express Conference, Marine Corps University, 9 April 2009.

¹³⁹ Interviews with members of 52nd Lowland Brigade, *Counterinsurgency in Helmand*, April 2008.

¹⁴⁰ Conversation with Major Rodrick McHaty, Quantico, 5 February 2009.

¹⁴¹ Interviews with members of 52nd Lowland Brigade, *Counterinsurgency in Helmand*, April 2008.

¹⁴² Discussion with Major Graham Shannon and Sergeant Stephen McConnell, Company Commander and Platoon Commander from 1 Royal Irish Regiment, Shrewsbury, UK, 24 October 2008.

¹⁴³ Discussion with Captain Eric Balough and other members of the Farah Embedded Training Team, Ft Riley, 29 October 2008. Discussion with officers of 1RIR. Discussion with Lieutenant Colonel Bertrand Ges, Battalion Commander, 3rd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, National Defense University, Washington DC, 12 September 2008.

¹⁴⁴ Discussion with Captain Mathew Hurt, Kandahar Embedded Training Team leader, Ft Leavenworth, Kansas, 30 October 2008.

¹⁴⁵ Major James Bryden, COIN Operations and 3rd Brigade of 205th (Hero) Corps, 12 January 2008.

¹⁴⁶ Discussion with Captain Mathew Hurt, Kandahar Embedded Training Team leader, Ft Leavenworth, Kansas, 30 October 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Discussion with Deputy Commander, Canadian OMLT, at Kandahar Airfield, 7 December 2008. Discussion with Dutch Special Operations Officer, Kandahar Airfield, 8 December 2008. Discussion with Col Hix, ARSIC, Kandahar Airfield, 8 December 2008.

force. They often manned isolated positions where they existed at the mercy of the Taliban. In 2008, the casualty rate among police in Kandahar was three times that of the army.¹⁴⁸

The Coalition in Regional Command South started mentoring the ANP in Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Zabul in the summer of 2007. The Canadians used their PRT and a 60-man OMLT to advise and train the ANP in Kandahar. In Helmand, 4 British and US police mentor teams worked with the province's 800 police. They focused on Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. The British formed two more teams in January 2008, which focused on the ANP in Sangin and Garmser while an American detachment went to work with the border police in Garmser. American teams also embedded with the ANP in Zabul and Uruzgan.¹⁴⁹

Mentoring probably had some effect. To give one example, there were 90 ANP in Garmser district. The British embedded three advisors with them. The advisors took the police out on patrol and taught them tactics. The police wanted not for aggressiveness. In firefights, police would try to employ fire and maneuver techniques. On several occasions, the head British advisor had to reel them back during combat. They suffered casualties in Taliban attacks yet did not lose heart. Often the police asked why they were not being allowed to assault enemy positions.¹⁵⁰

In terms of treatment of the population, though, the ANP continued to have a terrible reputation. As had been the case since 2001, many police forces remained just untrained militias under the influence of dominant tribes and warlords. Locals dubbed the police "gun lords", a term that had been used to describe the rapacious militias of the 1990s.¹⁵¹ Locals thought much higher of the ANA.¹⁵² The ANP still taxed vehicles on the roads, still took part in the poppy trade, still imprisoned the innocent without cause, and still brutalized people for the smallest of infractions.¹⁵³

The police were deeply involved in competition between warlords for political power. For example, in 2008, in Lashkar Gah, feuding broke out between the provincial police and the border police (who could not get down to the border).¹⁵⁴ Around Spin Boldak, there were frequent clashes between the border police and the highway police (a government-supported militia led by a local warlord). The commanders of the two forces were prominent leaders of rival tribes in the area. US and Canadian forces were reluctant to intervene.¹⁵⁵

The situation in Sangin was the most depressing. In spite of the British efforts to hold the town and build it up, few people could be motivated to join the ANP, which numbered just 18. Those 18 were essentially the personal tribal militia of the district governor. The ANP

¹⁴⁸ Discussion with Colonel Hix, Afghan Regional Security Integration Command Afghanistan (ARSIC), Kandahar Airfield, 8 December 2008.

¹⁴⁹ Brief by Lieutenant Colonel Bill Connor, Camp Lejeune, 17 March 2009.

¹⁵⁰ Discussion with British officers, Joint Service Command Staff College, Shrivenham, 20 October 2008.

¹⁵¹ Interviews with members of 52nd Lowland Brigade, *Counterinsurgency in Helmand*, April 2008. *Kandahar Provincial Handbook*, (Arlington, Virg.: IDS International, 2008), 10.

¹⁵² Discussion with British officers, Joint Service Command Staff College, Shrivenham, 20 October 2008.

¹⁵³ Sarah Chayes, "The Other Front," *Washington Post*, 14 December 2008.

¹⁵⁴ Brief by Lieutenant Colonel Bill Connor, Camp Lejeune, 17 March 2009.

¹⁵⁵ Discussion with Captain John Dvorak and Captain Dan Snow, team leaders from the Spin Boldak ABP Training Team, Ft Riley, Kansas, 29 October 2008.

levied taxes, took part in drug smuggling, and generally upset the population. Locals evacuated areas that the ANP regularly patrolled.¹⁵⁶ They also helped the Taliban target police walking alone or in small numbers in the town center. Many police deserted.¹⁵⁷

To bolster police numbers, in 2007, the Afghan government launched the Afghan National Auxiliary Police. Under this program, in every district locals could be recruited, given two weeks of training, and then join the police as auxiliary police. The auxiliary police had the same problems with corruption and abusive behavior as the official ANP. A plan existed for the auxiliary police to receive further training in 2008 and then be inducted into the official ANP. The plan fell by the wayside but pay for the auxiliaries nevertheless ended. The auxiliaries in some places—Delaram in Farah and Gereshk in Helmand for example—stayed around and taxed the people moving on the roads. These became yet another militia vying for power.¹⁵⁸

In late 2007 and early 2008, the Coalition introduced focused district development. Under this program, police in select districts received intensive training for one month in Kandahar. The police in Musa Qala, Gereshk, Sangin, and Gulistan all went through focused district development training. US Marines doubted whether it made a difference. Many “police” had been recruited specifically for the training and were from a different district (Musa Qala was an exception). They tended to desert following the training.¹⁵⁹

High Value Targeting

Starting in late 2006, US Special Operations Forces (SOF) and the British Special Boat Service (SBS) and Special Air Service (SAS) actively targeted Taliban leadership in southern Afghanistan. Results have varied.

Coalition forces targeted medium and high level regional insurgent leaders. The strategy had two goals. First, the Coalition hoped to demoralize the Taliban.¹⁶⁰ The Coalition believed that if it targeted the Taliban’s “hardline leaders,” foot soldiers could be persuaded to stop fighting, new commanders might hesitate before taking over their predecessor’s position, and senior leaders might be frightened.¹⁶¹ According to one senior US officer, these types of operations are designed to send a message to Taliban leadership that there is nowhere for them to hide from “the combined might of ISAF and the Afghan security forces.”¹⁶² In effect, if you become a Taliban commander, you can expect a speedy death sentence. Second, the Coalition hoped to disrupt insurgent organization. The leadership might only be removed temporarily but in the meantime the organization would not operate as effectively.

¹⁵⁶ Discussion with British officers, King’s College London, 23 October 2008.

¹⁵⁷ Discussion with Company Commander and Platoon Commander, 1 Royal Irish Regiment, Shrewsbury, UK, 24 October 2008.

¹⁵⁸ Discussion with 2/7, Twenty-nine Palms, 24 February 2009.

¹⁵⁹ Sangin did not have enough police to send to focused district development training. Therefore, the provincial chief of police sent police from other districts. Those police deserted as soon as they returned from training. Discussion with 2/7, Twenty-Nine Palms, 24 February 2009.

¹⁶⁰ See, for example, Tim Ripley, “Helmand Campaign Enters New Phase,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 23 April 2008.

¹⁶¹ Sardar Ahmad, “Forces in Afghanistan Shift Focus to Taliban Leaders,” *Agence France Presse*, 2 January 2007.

¹⁶² “Nowhere to Hide for Taliban Commanders,” International Security Assistance Force Press Release #2006-360, 13 December 2006.

As an ISAF spokesperson said, “if you take out the head, often the body doesn't know what to do.”¹⁶³

The Taliban's senior leader, Mullah Omar, stated that removing its leadership “will not create problems” for the organization and vowed that attacks will continue regardless.¹⁶⁴

Between 2006 and 2008, Coalition forces successfully removed numerous regional and district commanders (see Table 7). SOF raids were the foremost method of tracking down high value targets (HVTs); but snipers and air strikes were also used.¹⁶⁵ Two high-ranking Taliban killed through this strategy are of particular note. First, in December 2006, US-led forces killed Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Osmani, the reported heir of Mullah Omar, in a precision air strike.¹⁶⁶ Second, Mullah Dadullah was killed in a Helmand raid by the British SBS in May 2007. Many believed that the Taliban organization would be significantly damaged.¹⁶⁷

Some leaders have either surrendered to or been captured by Coalition forces. After UK airstrikes killed senior Taliban planner Sadiqullah and senior Taliban strategist Mullah Bismullah Akhund in June and July 2008 respectively, a senior Taliban commander in Helmand, Mullah Rahim, surrendered to Pakistani police in Quetta.

What difference has HVT targeting made?

The biggest difference was that on some occasions strikes slowed the Taliban's operational tempo. The porous border with Pakistan allowed senior Taliban leadership to reorganize and stage operations from Quetta, sending mid-level and junior commanders to fight in Afghanistan. Therefore, when a regional commander was removed from power, delays in operational activities could result while central leadership sent out a replacement from Pakistan. In some cases, the gap in finding a replacement reportedly reduced the Taliban's fighting capability.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ ISAF spokesman Richard E. Nugee quoted in Alisa Tang, “Key Taliban Leaders, About 50 Fighters Killed so Far in Southern Operation, NATO Says,” Associated Press, 20 December 2006.

¹⁶⁴ “Taliban Leader: Death Won't Slow Militant Jihad,” *USA Today*, 14 May 2007.

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, Mark Townsend, “Army Returns to an Old Tactic to Defeat Resurgent Taliban: Sniping,” *The Guardian* (UK), 15 February 2009.

¹⁶⁶ Jason Straziuso, “Senior Taliban Leader Killed in US Airstrike in Afghanistan, Military Says,” Associated Press, 24 December 2006.

¹⁶⁷ See “Pashtun Rising,” *Jane's Terrorism & Security Monitor*, 16 January 2008.

¹⁶⁸ According to the US-led coalition deputy commander of operations. Bronsen Roberts, “50 Rebel Leaders Killed, Captured this Year: US General,” Agence France Presse, 16 December 2007.

Table 7) Key insurgent leaders captured or killed

Date	Target	Rank	Location
19 Dec 2006	Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Osmani	Southern Afghanistan commander	Helmand
26 Jan 2007	Mullah Ibrahim	Regional commander	Musa Qala
4 Feb 2007	Mullah Abdul Ghafoor	Taliban Musa Qala commander	Musa Qala
14 Feb 2007	Mullah Manan	Regional commander	Musa Qala
Feb/Mar 2007	Mullah Jamaludin	Regional commander	Garmser
13 May 2007	Mullah Dadullah	Leading operational commander in S. Afghanistan	Garmser
3 Aug 2007	Mullah Rahim	Taliban commander for Helmand province	Baghran
30 Aug 2007	Mullah Barader Akhund	Member of Taliban leadership council	Between Sangin and Sarwan
Nov 2007	Mullah Morad Khan	Taliban commander	Captured in Zabul
3 Dec 2007	Mullah Sainy	Taliban cell leader	Musa Qala
7 Dec 2007	Mullah Tor Jan	Mid-level commander	Musa Qala
9 Dec 2007	Mullah Faizullah	Shadow governor	Helmand
9 Dec 2007	Mullah Mateen Akhund	Shadow district governor	Musa Qala
11 Feb 2008	Mansoor Dadullah	Former commander	Pakistan
18 Feb 2008	Mullah Abdul Matin	Taliban commander	Helmand
18 Feb 2008	Mullah Karim Agha	Taliban leader	Helmand
21 Feb 2008	Mullah Abdul Bari	Regional commander	Northern Helmand
26 Jun 2008	Sadiqullah	Senior Taliban facilitator / planner and bomb maker	Helmand
12 Jul 2008	Mullah Bismullah Akhund	Senior key facilitator for northern Helmand	Nowzad
19 Jul 2008	Mullah Rahim	Taliban commander of southern Afghanistan	Helmand
23 Jul 2008	Abdul Razaq	Taliban leader	Musa Qala
Nov 2008	Mullah Khairullah Shakir	Taliban commander	Uruzgan
Dec 2008	Mullah Salim	Shadow governor	Nad Ali

*Reputedly killed by Abdul Razak's border militia.

However, removing these leaders from power did not cause significant damage to the movement writ large. There was no direct correlation between Taliban leadership losses (including captures) and the number of insurgent attacks. In fact, the months after the deaths of both Osmani and Dadullah actually witnessed an increase in the number of overall

attacks in the south. Indeed, after two years of this decapitation strategy, September 2008 saw the highest number of security incidents and casualties in southern Afghanistan.¹⁶⁹

The Taliban used a cellular structure, meaning that it relied on networks and was not hierarchical. New commanders, trained and willing, quickly took their previous leader's place; some were more effective and destructive than their predecessors. Some commanders were succeeded by fellow tribesmen and family members. For example, Mullah Dadullah was replaced by his brother, Mullah Bakht Mohammad.¹⁷⁰

High value targeting sometimes undermined the insurgents' tactical and operational capabilities, but only temporarily. It is unclear whether the practice had a permanent effect, particularly at the strategic level.

Collateral Damage

Some Coalition operations, including air strikes in prosecution of the high value targeting campaign, may have had a negative impact. In 2008, there were 2,118 civilian casualties reported throughout Afghanistan, an increase from the 1,523 reported in 2007.¹⁷¹ Nearly 900, 41 percent of the 2008 total, occurred in the south.¹⁷² While 567 of those casualties in the south were caused by insurgents, more attention was drawn to the 274 deaths caused by Coalition forces.¹⁷³

Casualties caused by Coalition military operations were often cited in the press as a reason for declining popular support with the Afghan people. Polls backed up these reports. Support of the US military throughout the country steadily declined, from 78 percent of respondents in 2006 to 71 percent in 2007 and 63 percent in 2009.¹⁷⁴ Air strikes were particularly criticized, even by President Karzai. In a 2009 poll, 77 percent of respondents said that air strikes were unacceptable in fighting the Taliban because they endangered too many civilians.¹⁷⁵ US forces began to rely heavily on air strikes once operational restrictions were lifted in 2005. In just six months during 2006, the United States conducted more than 2,000 air strikes throughout Afghanistan, with a particular focus on southern Afghanistan.¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁹ Fifty-four security-related incidents were reported in September 2008, compared to 31 in the same month of the previous year, and 31 in the same month a year before that. In all, 379 casualties were recorded in comparison to 236 in the same month of the year prior, and 182 in the same month a year before that. According to data obtained through the NCTC Worldwide Incidents Tracking System: <http://wits.nctc.gov/>.

¹⁷⁰ However, his brother was fired by senior Taliban leadership only seven months later. See "Taliban Leader Expels Commander," *The New York Times*, 31 December 2007. He was then captured in Pakistan a couple months later.

¹⁷¹ United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, Human Rights Unit, *Afghanistan: Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, 2008, ii.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷³ The attribution for the remainder of attacks in the south could not be determined. United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, Human Rights Unit, *Afghanistan: Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, 2008, 35.

¹⁷⁴ See the 2009 Afghanistan poll conducted by ABC/BBC, 10. Online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/05_02_09afghan_poll_2009.pdf. Note that violence in Helmand province limited the poll's sample size there, according to Jill McGivering, "Afghan People 'Losing Confidence,'" BBC News, 9 February 2009.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ David S. Cloud, "US Airstrikes on Increase To Aid NATO in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 17

Nearly 2,000 tons of munitions were dropped in 2007, which decreased in 2008 to 1,314 tons.¹⁷⁷

The Taliban exploited the effects of the air strikes. Following Hezbollah's example, the Taliban provided aid for airstrike victims' families, enabling them to "garner support in the southern provinces."¹⁷⁸ The United States has since attempted to mirror that strategy.

One reason why casualties caused by Coalition military operations tended to receive criticism is that the Taliban were faster at releasing information (often fabricated). The Coalition used an anachronistic approach in which public messages had to go through several layers of bureaucracy to be approved for accuracy before being signed off for release. As a special operations officer observed, "the Taliban's 'message is out on the street within hours,' while the coalition is still 'trying to get ground truth ... The first with the most news has established the agenda and everybody else's after that is just kind of secondary.'"¹⁷⁹

Afghan Governance

The gains that the Coalition and Afghan National Army made on the battlefield were not backed by reforms in the Afghan government. Many of the same problems that had plagued southern Afghanistan since 2001 persisted after 2006. The Asia Foundation's 2008 survey found that 33 percent of the people in southern Afghanistan and 36 percent of the people in western Afghanistan (which includes Farah) thought the provincial government was doing a bad job or a very bad job—higher percentages than in any other region in the country.¹⁸⁰

Warlords no longer held official positions but still held huge influence over the government, often with Karzai's tacit approval. In Kandahar, Ahmed Wali Karzai continued to dominate. The deaths of prominent Alikozai and Alizai tribal leaders in 2007 and 2008 only increased his power.¹⁸¹ The governor, Asadullah Khalid, was beholden to him. Asadullah was also linked to torture and corruption.¹⁸² As had been the case in 2006, he eradicated poppy in a biased fashion, ignoring allies while targeting rivals. The UNODC found that 91 percent of the poppy fields targeted for eradication in 2008 fell outside approved eradication zones, implying that the governor was purposely ignoring large poppy fields, probably those of his allies.¹⁸³

In Helmand, Karzai removed the reform-minded Mohammed Daoud in December 2006. The British had admired Daoud for his honesty, development experience, and the fact he was relatively uncorrupt.¹⁸⁴ This admiration made him look like a British puppet to Karzai

November 2006.

¹⁷⁷ Tom Vanden Brook, "Fewer Airstrikes in Afghanistan Mirror Tactical Shift," *USA Today*, 8 April 2009.

¹⁷⁸ According to Sarah Holewinski of the Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict (CIVIC) in Rachel Morarjee, "Air war costs NATO Afghan supporters," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 December 2006.

¹⁷⁹ Sean D. Naylor, "Advantage Taliban: Insurgents in Afghanistan Have Mastered Media Manipulation," *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2008: 28.

¹⁸⁰ Asia Foundation, 2008.

¹⁸¹ *Kandahar Provincial Handbook*, (Arlington, Virg.: IDS International, 2008), 31.

¹⁸² Gloria Galloway, "Kandahar governor's string runs out," *Globe and Mail*, 15 August 2008.

¹⁸³ *Kandahar Provincial Handbook*, (Arlington, Virg.: IDS International, 2008), 25.

¹⁸⁴ Patrick Bishop, *3PARA* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 50.

and may have contributed to his removal.¹⁸⁵ Asadullah Wafa, former governor of Kunar province, replaced him. Wafa had few connections in Helmand but was corrupt nonetheless. He stole substantial sums of money and reversed many of the gains made by Daoud.

In March 2008, Gulab Mangal replaced Wafa. The antithesis of a warlord, Mangal had extensive experience as a provincial governor and, coming from eastern Afghanistan, no ties to the warlords of Helmand. He focused on reducing corruption. The British supported him. Unfortunately, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada and Abdul Rahman Khan did not.¹⁸⁶ Karzai reportedly considered removing him. Politicking to hold onto the governorship absorbed Mangal's time and distracted him from helping the people.¹⁸⁷

Governance in the districts was no better. The Asia Foundation's 2008 survey found that 40 percent of respondents in southern and western Afghanistan believed their district government was doing a bad or a very bad job, again exceeding responses for any other region in the country. Numerous district governors hid out in the provincial capitals, away from the fighting of the rural areas. Those who stayed survived by the weight of their own military and political power. They did not flee but they rarely ruled fairly or in a representative fashion. For example, Izatullah, the district governor of Sangin, adjudicated all disputes in favor of his own tribe.¹⁸⁸ In late 2007, the government formed the Independent Directorate for Local Governance under Jelani Popal in order to improve district-level governance; little change occurred in the south. In many areas, the tribal structure broke down and the people seemed to have little faith in it. In the 2008 Asia Foundation survey, 38 percent of the respondents in southern Afghanistan said that local shuras were not fair and could not be trusted. Nowhere else were shuras so disliked.¹⁸⁹ The best a district could hope for was a benevolent warlord like Mullah Naqibullah in Arghandab (Kandahar) or Talakwali Jamalzai in Gulistan (Farah) who tried to rule fairly and worked within a tribal structure that had not fallen apart.

The PRTs in the south tried to improve the situation. In 2007, the British PRT established a \$30 million stabilization fund for Helmand. As well as reconstruction projects, the PRT ran programs dealing with justice, governance, reform of security forces, and counter-narcotics. Britain expanded the size of its PRT, increasing the number of civilians on staff in Lashkar Gah from 10 (in 2006) to 50 (by 2008). Eight additional civilians moved out to Garmser, Gereshk, and Musa Qala.¹⁹⁰

The Canadian PRT in Kandahar expanded its work as well. At first, the PRT invested in Afghan programs, such as the National Solidarity Program, and in revitalizing the agricultural system.¹⁹¹ In 2008, the PRT switched to higher-profile projects. The Canadian government started a \$50 million project to refurbish the Dahla dam on the Arghandab River as well as

¹⁸⁵ Discussion with Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 24 October 2008.

¹⁸⁶ *Helmand*, Provincial Handbook, IDS International, October 2008, 39.

¹⁸⁷ Brief by Lieutenant Colonel Justin Holly, Camp Lejeune, 17 March 2009.

¹⁸⁸ Discussion with British officers, King's College London, 23 October 2008.

¹⁸⁹ "Afghanistan in 2008: A Survey of the Afghan People," The Asia Foundation, 2008, 58, 78.

¹⁹⁰ Brief by Lieutenant Colonel Justin Holly, Camp Lejeune, 17 March 2009.

¹⁹¹ Presentation by Lee Windsor, Emerald Express Conference, Marine Corps University, 9 April 2009.

the canal system. Additionally, the PRT worked to repair 50 schools and vaccinate 350,000 children against polio.¹⁹²

While the PRTs certainly helped improve the delivery of goods and services and nudge the government toward fair policies, they could not fix the problem.

Farah

As the fighting progressed, the Taliban began to spread to the west, primarily into Farah province. During the early years of the war, Farah was a relatively quiet backwater of minor strategic significance—mainly a lawless thoroughfare for smugglers moving between Iran and southern Afghanistan, and a byway on the Ring Road between Kandahar and Herat. Security fell to a PRT, the Afghan police, a single kandak, and a handful of US Special Forces. In late 2006, the Taliban began taking over Farah's eastern districts and targeting Afghan army and police with IEDs. In 2007, the situation became much worse.

In late October 2007, a large group of hardcore insurgents moved into Farah from Helmand in preparation for a major Taliban offensive. Many drove openly down the Ring Road wearing black turbans and carrying weapons.¹⁹³ Some went to Bakwa, a poppy-growing region; the rest drove north up the Gulistan valley where several hundred set up numerous ambush sites on the high ground above the river. On October 29, insurgents attacked the Gulistan district center, killing as many as 20 police and beheading a number of others, including several family members and supporters of the district governor, Haji Qasim.¹⁹⁴ Qasim and the district police chief, Rahmatullah, fled.¹⁹⁵ Roughly 80 Afghan army and police and 20–30 US trainers tried to re-secure the district center on 30 October but a well-laid ambush drove them out of the valley. District government would not return to Gulistan until May 2008.

On the same day that the convoy was ambushed in Gulistan, insurgents attacked the Bakwa district center and destroyed the abandoned garrison.¹⁹⁶ Insurgents then looted and burned the Khak-e-Safed district center north of Farah city after police conducted a “tactical retreat.”¹⁹⁷ At Bakwa and Khak-e-Safed, the police made little if any attempt to stand and fight. These attacks on district centers, covered in the national or international press, called attention to the Taliban's growing political power in Farah.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² *Kandahar Provincial Handbook*, (Arlington, Virg.: IDS International, 2008), 49, 51–52.

¹⁹³ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

¹⁹⁴ “Afghan Daily Blames Lack of Well-equipped Police for Loss of Districts”, *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, 26 November 2007.

¹⁹⁵ Qasim was not reinstated until April 2008 when he was flown in by helicopter to the Gulistan district center. “Governance Returns to Gulistan”, ISAF press release, 29 April 2008. Interview with 2008 Farah PRT commander, 25 February 2009.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander.

¹⁹⁷ “Taliban Briefly Capture Western Afghan District”, *Agence France Presse*, 5 November 2007. Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander. The attackers made off with most of the weapons and ammunition in the police garrison.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT intelligence officer.

Recapture of Musa Qala

After February, Musa Qala had become a hub of insurgent activity—a command and control node, opium-processing location, and training base. As many as 2,000 Taliban operated out of the town.¹⁹⁹ Insurgents mounted raids from Musa Qala into Farah province and neighboring districts in Helmand.

The British had not expected to move against Musa Qala in 2007. Rather, they had been trying to convince local elders to build a militia that could force the Taliban out of Musa Qala on its own. Their efforts had met little success and the plan was shelved in August.²⁰⁰ Then in October something unexpected occurred. Mullah Abdul Salem, a mid-level Taliban leader in Musa Qala and son of a powerful elder of the Pirzai sub-tribe of the Alizai, approached the government. He said he was ready to turn against the Taliban and free Musa Qala.²⁰¹ Mullah Salem was a rival of Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, who had imprisoned Mullah Salem in 2002.²⁰² Salem's interest seems to have been political power. He wanted a spot in the government that would give him control of Musa Qala and perhaps other areas in northern Helmand. After some negotiations, Karzai and the Coalition proved amenable to working with Salem. Unfortunately, Salem was in no position to defeat the Taliban in Musa Qala on his own. He had a militia but it was not large enough to re-take Musa Qala.²⁰³ The Coalition would need to mount an operation to clear the town.²⁰⁴

The clearing of Musa Qala (Operation Mar Karardad) was a major military affair involving 3,200 men: 3 ANA kandaks, a British battalion-size force, a reserve US battalion from the 82nd Airborne Division (1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment), and US Special Forces teams.²⁰⁵ The commander of Task Force Helmand, Brigadier Andrew MacKay, formulated a careful plan to cordon off Musa Qala and then clear it. He did not want to “smash up” Musa Qala, which would turn the town into a symbol of Western oppression.²⁰⁶ As in Sangin, large numbers of people were allowed to flee in order to avoid civilian casualties. The government even dropped flyers warning of an attack.²⁰⁷ MacKay also devised a stabilization plan to reconstruct the town and re-establish the government following the military operations.

In early November, MacKay set the first blocking force against the eastern side of Musa Qala. To get into position, Royal Marines fought their way past 250 Taliban while crossing the Helmand River at night. Thereafter, running battles broke out between the Coalition blocking force and the Taliban. Inside the cordon, the Taliban took up positions in Musa Qala. The British began probing those positions after 2 to 3 weeks. Raids and air strikes

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Donnelly and Gary Schmitt, "Musa Qala: Adapting to the Realities of Modern Counterinsurgency," www.smallwarsjournal.com, 2008. Accessed October 2008.

²⁰⁰ Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone*, 246.

²⁰¹ Discussion with Major Steve Hart, Operations Officer, 40 Commando, Royal Marines, Taunton, UK, 22 October 2008.

²⁰² All four Alizai sub-tribes are present in Musa Qala—Jalozai, Hasanzai, Pirzai, and Itharzai. “The battle for Musa Qala,” *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 3 April 2008.

²⁰³ Discussion with Brigadier MacKay, DCDC, 21 October 2008.

²⁰⁴ Discussion with Brigadier MacKay, DCDC, 21 October 2008.

²⁰⁵ Discussion with British officers, Joint Service Command Staff College, Shrivenham, 20 October 2008.

²⁰⁶ Discussion with Brigadier MacKay, DCDC, 21 October 2008.

²⁰⁷ “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008, 113.

picked off Taliban leaders. Many Taliban fighters defected to join Mullah Salem, thinning the insurgents' ranks.²⁰⁸

In mid November a blocking force went in on the western side of the town, and in early December on the southern side. These forces included the three Afghan army kandaks. Finally, the battalion from the 82nd Airborne Division, under Lieutenant Colonel Brian Mennes, air assaulted from the north into positions all around the town to block off more possible escape routes.²⁰⁹ From their cordon, the Coalition forces patrolled up to the Taliban lines and conducted multiple air strikes per day. AC-130 gunships took part.²¹⁰ Nearly a month of air strikes, probes, and running battles cost them 300–350 men by British estimates.²¹¹

The Taliban stuck it out until early December. They could take no more and broke. When the Coalition entered the town on 9 December there was little resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Mennes' airborne battalion secured a lodgment into the town. The 3rd Kandak of 3rd Brigade, 205th Corps then entered, followed by Coalition forces.²¹²

Over the following days, Karzai personally appointed Mullah Salem to be the new district governor of Musa Qala. Coalition forces did not garrison Musa Qala. One ANA kandak with British advisors was left to watch over the town. Locals slowly started to return. The British PRT started projects, including a cash-for-work program, the rebuilding of a mosque, and the construction of a concrete road through the market. The provincial line directors from Lashkar Gah—such as the director of public health, director of education, and director of rural rehabilitation and development—visited Musa Qala to investigate how to improve goods and services. As in Sangin, USAID and MRRD contributed to the reconstruction activity.²¹³

The police force reformed under Commander Koka, the old militia commander and an inveterate enemy of the Taliban. His 300 policemen hailed from Lashkar Gah and Kabul. The British, and later the US Marines, approved of his performance. Unlike other militia commanders, he worked with the local tribal shura. Locals did not complain to the British about his police.²¹⁴

Mullah Salem gradually expanded his powerbase. He and the British engaged tribal elders who also returned from Lashkar Gah. Popal, head of the IDLG, helped bring the tribal elders and Mullah Salem together. He also engaged elders in rural villages.²¹⁵ Mullah Salem regularly resolved disputes. He also gave out \$70,000 per month to maintain the loyalty of

²⁰⁸ Discussion with Major Hart.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone*, 247.

²¹¹ Discussion with Brigadier MacKay, DCDC, 21 October 2008.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Discussion with 2/7, Twenty-Nine Palms, 23 February 2009. Interviews with members of 52nd Lowland Brigade, *Counterinsurgency in Helmand*, April 2008. *Helmand*, Provincial Handbook, IDS International, October 2008, 41.

²¹⁵ Discussion with Brigadier MacKay, DCDC, 21 October 2008.

the people.²¹⁶ Besides Koka's police, Mullah Salem had his own militia. Locals complained about the militia. Salem sometimes used them to target opponents of his Pirzai sub-tribe, such as the Hassanzai sub-tribe (Sher Mohammed Akhundzada is Hassanzai).²¹⁷

The loss of Musa Qala was a major blow to the Taliban. After the battle, 350–400 Taliban attempted to reconcile with the government.²¹⁸ The British tried to exploit this success and the turning of Mullah Salem with further negotiations with the Taliban. They opened negotiations with some Taliban commanders. Karzai was not politically ready for negotiations, though. He expelled a British diplomat and an Irish diplomat for negotiating with the Taliban in Helmand.

The Taliban Strike at Urban Areas

Most of Kandahar and Helmand had been in flames from 2006 onwards. In spite of all the fighting, the provincial capitals of Kandahar and Lashkar Gah stayed relatively safe. IEDs and suicide bombs went off but the Taliban made few direct attacks or attempts to take over the two cities. In 2008, that changed, partly because of further cracks in the government's support base.

Kandahar and the Sarpoza Prison Break

Since 2001, Mullah Naqibullah and his Alikozai militia had kept the Arghandab, “the gateway to Kandahar,” clear of insurgent activity. In March 2007, an IED wounded him. He survived until September 2007, when, in weakened condition, he succumbed to a heart attack. Unfortunately, no leader of equal strength replaced him at the head of the Alikozai tribe. Haji Aghan Lalai, an experienced police chief and opponent of the Taliban, was the favorite candidate, but Hamid Karzai interceded and installed Karremullah Naqib, Mullah Naqib's 22-year old son instead. Too young to win the loyalty of the tribal elders, his appointment left the tribe fractured.²¹⁹

The Taliban took advantage of this situation. Without the Alikozai militia united behind him, in October, the Alikozai district governor of Khakrez (the district to the north of Arghandab) decided to allow the Taliban into his district. From there, the Taliban pushed south into Arghandab.²²⁰ The situation worsened in July 2008 when insurgents killed Habibullah Jan, a powerful Alizai tribal elder and member of Parliament. His death allowed insurgents to enter villages west of Kandahar formerly under his control. At the same time, the Taliban made inroads southwest of Kandahar city, in the villages of Nakhonay.²²¹ It was only a matter of time before they infiltrated into Kandahar city itself.

²¹⁶ Discussion with 2/7, Twenty-Nine Palms, 23 February 2009. Brief by Lieutenant Colonel Justin Holly, Camp Lejeune, 17 March 2009.

²¹⁷ Interviews with members of 52nd Lowland Brigade, *Counterinsurgency in Helmand*, April 2008.

²¹⁸ Discussion with Brigadier MacKay, DCDC, 21 October 2008.

²¹⁹ Omar El Akkad and Sraeme Smith, “Mullah's death leaves Kandahar exposed,” *Globe and Mail*, 13 October 2007. Sarah Chayes, “A Mullah Dies, and War Comes Knocking,” *Washington Post*, 18 November 2007.

²²⁰ Sarah Chayes, “A Mullah Dies, and War Comes Knocking,” *Washington Post*, 18 November 2007.

²²¹ Graeme Smith, “Inside the Taliban jailbreak,” *Globe and Mail*, 3 July 2008.

Over the following months, security in the city worsened. In February 2008, a suicide car bomb on the outskirts of the city killed 100 Afghans, including a police commander, Abdul Hakim Jan.²²² A day later a second attack occurred.

The big event occurred on 13 June when 30–50 Taliban, specially trained in Pakistan, infiltrated into Kandahar, intent on attacking the Sarpoza prison, which housed hundreds of detainees. During the early evening, the Taliban warned locals of the impending attack and instructed them to get out of the area. The police heard nothing of this; an indicator of the gulf between them and the people. That night insurgents launched a coordinated attack to break open the prison. The operation started with attacks on police positions near the prison, effectively pinning down the police. The assault on the prison itself was tactically sophisticated. The Taliban drove a suicide fuel truck bomb to the main gate. When, for an unknown reason, the suicide truck did not explode, the Taliban improvised and ignited its fuel tank with an RPG. The explosion stunned the prison guards and breached the main gate. Taliban cadres then entered the prison on foot, overcoming the stunned guards and freeing the prisoners. The Taliban guided the escape of over 1,000 prisoners, breaking them up into small groups to move through Kandahar and into the safer rural areas. Neither the police nor the Canadians could get to the prison in time to stop them.²²³

The Taliban were not done yet. Three days later insurgents swept into several towns in Arghandab, causing hundreds of civilians to flee. The Afghan Ministry of Defense estimated that 300 to 400 Taliban were positioned there. On 18 June, Canadian and 700 Afghan soldiers counterattacked and, after fierce fighting, cleared out the Taliban. The damage had been done, though. The Taliban had shown their ability to attack Kandahar city, something that had previously been out of the question.

The Sarpoza prison break and its aftermath in the Arghandab was a humiliating defeat for the Afghan government and the Coalition. The attacks finally brought down Asadullah Khalid. Karzai removed both him and the provincial police chief. Major General Rahmatullah Raoufi replaced Asadullah Khalid, until he too was removed in December, reportedly at the behest of Ahmed Wali Karzai. The new governor was Toorayalai Wesa, an educated agricultural expert and a Barakzai with close ties to Karzai family.

Lashkar Gah and the Fall of Nad Ali

A similar dynamic unfolded in Helmand. The militia of Abdul Rahman Khan, police chief of Helmand before 2006, had kept the Taliban out of Lashkar Gah and nearby towns (Marja and Nad Ali) for years. After stepping down as chief of police, he still used his militia to control Marja, his seat of power, and Nad Ali. By doing so, the militia secured the western approaches to Lashkar Gah. In 2008, the Coalition targeted his poppy fields, resulting in clashes with the provincial police. At the same time, the Taliban attacked the militia. The militia's senior commander, Toor Jan, died in the fighting. In September, Marja fell and the Taliban gained a foothold in Nad Ali. Whether the Taliban advance occurred because poppy eradication had weakened Abdul Rahman Khan or because Abdul Rahman Khan, upset at

²²² *Kandahar Provincial Handbook*, (Arlington, Virg.: IDS International, 2008), 64..

²²³ Graeme Smith, "Inside the Taliban jailbreak," *Globe and Mail*, 3 July 2008. Graeme Smith, "It's a Bust," *New York Post*, 6 July 2008.

the eradication, made a deal with the Taliban is unknown. Whatever the case, the Coalition had lost yet another piece on the chessboard and Lashkar Gah now stood under threat.²²⁴

From their foothold in Nad Ali, the Taliban attacked Lashkar Gah in October. Nearly 200 insurgents massed around the outskirts of the city of Lashkar Gah on the night of 11 October. Their target supposedly was the NDS headquarters and the governor's house. Airborne surveillance detected many of the insurgents and their vehicles. Air strikes killed as many as 100 before the attack could really get underway. Nevertheless, insurgents shelled the city and skirmishes broke out between the Taliban and the police and ANA around the city limits. The skirmishes lasted six hours or more before the Taliban broke contact. People inside the city itself grew worried and some panicked.²²⁵

Fighting continued around Lashkar Gah for the next 10 days. The day after the first attack, Royal Marines and the Afghan National Army retook the Nad Ali district center. Some reports suggested that 1,000 insurgents fought around the capital. In response, the Afghan National Army and police poured 2,300 reinforcements into the area, including Commander Koka and his men from Musa Qala.²²⁶ Finally, on 22 October, the Taliban backed off. The British cleared Nad Ali but could not hold it. Marja and Nad Ali remained outside government control.

Increasing American Presence in Rural Areas

At the same time that the Taliban were drawing in on Kandahar and Lashkar Gah, the Coalition was deploying more and more men to gain control of the rural districts. By the end of 2008, 8,100 British, 2,750 Canadians, 1,700 Dutch, and 1,000 Australians operated in the south.

Changes were also made to the employment of forces. For too long, Regional Command South had preferred search and destroy operations. In late 2007, Regional Command South sequestered two battalions as reserves that could be sent to clear areas or reinforce other forces conducting major operations. These battalions saw a lot of fighting but too often withdrew from the areas they had cleared. The Taliban, of course, re-occupied those areas.²²⁷ In the summer, General McKiernan succeeded General McNeill as commander of ISAF. To his credit, he demanded that one of the two battalions serving as a regional reserve (a US battalion) stop search and destroy operations and focus on securing a specific area. Thus, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment (2-2 Infantry) went to Maywand district, the heart of the Noorzai tribe, which had long been under Taliban control. Over the autumn, the battalion conducted numerous operations in the region, often along with the ANA and in coordination with the Canadians. Additionally, the United States deployed two Marine units to southern Afghanistan: the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit and 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment (2/7)—roughly 3,000 men in all.

²²⁴ *Helmand*, Provincial Handbook, IDS International, October 2008, 40, 42.

²²⁵ Tom Coghlan, "Taliban stage audacious 'Tet-style' attack on British HQ city," *The Times*, 13 October 2008.

²²⁶ Discussions with 2/7, Twenty-Nine Palms, 23 February 2009. Tom Coghlan, "Taliban stage audacious 'Tet-style' attack on British HQ city," *The Times*, 13 October 2008.

²²⁷ Matt Dupee, "Tracking the Coalition's Afghan spring offensive," *The Long War Journal*, 7 June 2008, <http://www.longwarjournal.org>, accessed November 2008.

ISAF deployed the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit into Garmser, which lay south of Lashkar Gah. Fighters traveling northward from Pakistan transited through the district. The British had moved into Garmser in late 2006. Their forces, based at Camp Delhi, were too small to push out the Taliban and the British were confined to the north of the district around the district center. The Taliban launched regular attacks on the British positions and established their own positions opposite them, soon dubbed the forward line of enemy troops (“FLET”) by the British. Heavy fighting caused the population in the district center to flee.²²⁸ From late 2006 on, British units and Afghan police slugged it out across the Garmser no man’s land.²²⁹

The 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit sought to clear south of the British positions into the Taliban defensive zone. The Marines went in on 28 April and pushed through the Taliban positions. Heavy fighting erupted as the Taliban counterattacked, intent on protecting their infiltration routes into Helmand. They suffered hundreds of casualties fighting Marine riflemen and their supporting helicopters and aircraft. The Marines had focused an entire battalion against one rural district; an unprecedented concentration of forces for Afghanistan (the Canadians had one reinforced battalion for all of Kandahar province). And once their area had been cleared, the Marines held the ground until September. As a result, the district governor returned to the district center and the police started operating more aggressively. The Garmser police chief (who had been effective and opposed poppy) had been murdered in March 2008 but fortunately his successor proved competent.²³⁰ In September, violence was sufficiently low for the Marines to hand Garmser over to an ANA kandak and a British engineer company.

The other Marine unit, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment (2/7), was assigned to work with the Afghan National Police. They were part of a new effort by CSTC-A to train the police. The 900 Marines of 2/7 were spread out into 8 districts in two provinces: Bala Baluk, Bakwa, Delaram, and Gulistan in Farah; and Nowzad, Musa Qala, Gereshk, and Sangin in Helmand. Training the police was no easy task. Sangin was contested ground and fielded but a handful of police. Nowzad was a war zone. The town lay abandoned. The people had never returned after fighting intensified in 2006. Like Garmser, the enemy had established fighting positions around the town, particularly in the cultivated area to the east. In that area, cut by irrigation canals and lush with vegetation, the Taliban regularly manned fortified in-depth positions with inter-locking lines of fire that the Marines likened to the Western Front.²³¹

Nevertheless, in some districts, the presence of Marines made a difference. They could keep back the Taliban long enough for the police to survive and in some cases nudge police chiefs and district governors away from corruption enough to garner volunteers.²³² The Marines found that the police would fight (indeed some were veterans of years of war), especially if given proper support.

²²⁸ Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone*, 134–137.

²²⁹ Discussion with British officers, Joint Service Command Staff College, Shrivenham, 20 October 2008. “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008, 108.

²³⁰ Discussion with British officers, Joint Service Command Staff College, Shrivenham, 20 October 2008.

²³¹ Discussion with 2/7, Twenty-Nine Palms, 23 February 2009.

²³² Conversation with Major Rodrick McHaty, Quantico, 5 February 2009.

This was particularly the case in Farah. In Bala Baluk and Gulistan, the police and Marines pushed the Taliban onto their back foot—at least temporarily.²³³ An aggressive police chief in Bala Baluk (Commander Khodidad) and an influential district governor in Gulistan (Qassim Khan) helped. In other districts—Bakwa and Delaram—new police stood up and Taliban violence stayed at a low level.²³⁴ These were just initial steps, though, and whether they will lead to good governance or true local opposition to the Taliban is not yet clear.

Conclusion

By the beginning of 2009, open warfare had been raging in southern Afghanistan for over three years. What had been the result of all this fighting? The Coalition had kept the Afghan government afloat in the south, preventing the Taliban from completing the victory they had won in early 2006 when they defeated the bulk of the police forces. Nevertheless, the Taliban were not clearly weaker than they had been in 2006 (see Table 8). The small villages between the district centers and much of the cultivable area along the river valleys were not regularly patrolled by Coalition or Afghan forces and were suspected to be under strong Taliban influence. Famously, in September 2008, the British had to mount a battalion-size operation—through heavy fighting—just to get a turbine to the Kajaki dam. Of most concern, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar city appeared increasingly under threat.

²³³ Discussion with 2/7, Twenty-Nine Palms, 24 February 2009.

²³⁴ Discussions with 2/7, Twenty-Nine Palms, 23 February 2009.

Table 8) Control over districts in southern and western Afghanistan

Kandahar	Mid-2006	Late 2008
Kandahar city	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Arghandab	Government-controlled	Contested
Khakruz	Government-controlled	Contested
Zharey	Contested	Contested
Panjwai	Contested	Contested
Maywand	Contested	Contested
Spin Boldak	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Reg	Contested	Contested
Shurabak	Contested	Contested
Maruf	Unknown	Unknown
Arghestan	Unknown	Unknown
Shah Wali Kot	Contested	Contested
Mianeshin	Government-controlled	Contested
Nish	Contested	Unknown
Ghorak	Contested	Contested
Helmand	Mid-2006	Late 2008
Lashkar Gah	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Gereshk	Contested	Contested
Nad Ali	Government-controlled	Contested
Nawa ye Barakzai	Government-controlled	Unknown
Garmser	Contested	Contested
Dishu	Contested	Contested
Washir	Ungoverned	Contested
Sangin	Contested	Contested
Nowzad	Contested	Contested
Musa Qala	Contested	Government-controlled
Kajaki	Contested	Contested
Baghran	Ungoverned	Contested
Khianeshin	Contested	Contested
Farah	Mid-2006	Late 2008
Farah city	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Bala Baluk	Contested	Contested
Gulistan	Contested	Contested
Bakwa	Contested	Contested
Delaram	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Pur Chaman	Contested	Contested
Khak-e-Safed	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Lash wa Juwayn	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Shib Koh	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Qala Kan	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Anar Dara	Government-controlled	Government-controlled
Pusht Rod	Government-controlled	Government-controlled

*This table is based on CNA's subjective assessment of secondary source material on the situation in each district. We lacked information on many districts. It is only meant to show that many districts remained contested in 2008.

Why were the Afghan government and Coalition unable to defeat the Taliban? To some extent, the Coalition never had enough men. Small British and Canadian detachments posted out alone and unafraid fielded too few men to patrol regularly. As a result, outposts could protect little beyond their front gate, and large portions of the cultivated area where the people resided were left to the Taliban. Additionally, counterinsurgency techniques improved slowly. The Coalition had difficulty breaking away from search and destroy missions and an aggressive use of air power.

The greatest constraint on progress, though, was government misrule. The Afghan government favored warlords, handicapped competent governors, and took part in the poppy trade. The police remained heavily corrupt and abusive toward the population. A few districts were perhaps exceptions, but the situation in many of the rural areas was as unhappy as it had been in 2006. In this environment, the Taliban thrived. Indeed, the people looked to them to provide law and order. In the words of British Ambassador in 2008, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: “the current situation is bad; the security situation is getting worse; so is corruption and the Government has lost all trust...The foreign forces are ensuring the survival of a regime which would collapse without them.”²³⁵

Could any of this have been avoided? To a certain extent, yes. Britain and Canada could have deployed more forces earlier on and could have adopted better counterinsurgency measures. Even such improvements, though, might not have defeated the Taliban. Government misrule still would have compelled people to support the Taliban. To truly reduce violence, Karzai would have had to relinquish support for the warlords. Could he have done so? Karzai never had a strong political base and offending the warlords would have been a risky strategy. Nevertheless, greater efforts could have been made to reform the police and include marginalized elements of society within the political power structure. Karzai himself could have stayed out of inner tribal politics, allowing the tribes to select leaders whom they all supported rather than leaders who would improve Karzai’s political position. Such efforts would have created a far more conducive environment for effective counterinsurgency in places like Sangin, Nad Ali, and Arghandab.

Perhaps it was never possible for the Taliban to have been defeated altogether in southern Afghanistan but the Coalition and the Afghan government could have made different choices that would have thrown the Taliban on the back foot. Hopefully, time has not run out. Hopefully, we can still make these changes and turn the tide in southern Afghanistan.

²³⁵ Charles Bremner and Michael Evans, “British envoy says mission in Afghanistan is doomed,” *The Times*, 2 October 2008.

A Brief History of the War in Farah: Southwest Afghanistan, 2002-2007

During the early years of the war, Afghanistan's southwestern province of Farah was a relatively quiet backwater of minor strategic significance – mainly a lawless thoroughfare for smugglers moving between Iran and southern Afghanistan, and a byway on the Ring Road between Kandahar and Herat.

In late 2006, the Taliban began taking over Farah's eastern districts and targeting Afghan army and police with IEDs. In 2007, insurgents launched large-scale ambushes and overthrew several district centers. The province today is a major battleground.

This section explores the causes of the Taliban's westward expansion into Farah, focusing on the period of 2002-2007. The section's major findings are that the Taliban were able to re-establish themselves in Farah for the following reasons:

- Competition among various militia leaders, police, and tribes over political power and control over illegal activities created rifts that the Taliban could exploit.
- Police and other corrupt officials were involved in extortion, kidnapping, looting, and harassment of rival tribes. As a result, there were widespread popular grievances against the government.
- There were few Coalition or Afghan forces in the province to stop the Taliban's advance.

2002-2005

The Taliban resurgence first hit Helmand and Kandahar in late 2005. It did not hit Farah until a year later. From 2002 to 2005, Farah was off the radar screen. Bandits and petty warlords preyed on travelers along the province's major roads, especially the highway connecting the Ring Road with Farah city. Farah's main power-brokers consisted of anyone with a large number of men under arms – be they police, insurgents, or local tribesmen. Narcotics traffickers moved through the province unhindered, often with the help of senior provincial officials, including the governor.²³⁶

The province fell under Regional Command West (RC West) based in Herat, which maintained little or no permanent presence in Farah. The Farah Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) began operating in the fall of 2004, out of a base near Farah city; it had no support from conventional combat forces. From 2002-2005 there was only one Afghan army battalion for all of RC West; its soldiers rarely went to Farah before 2006. When they did, they avoided combat operations.

There was a functioning provincial police force, but it had little or no presence in many of the districts, and was notorious for extorting money from travelers at checkpoints and

²³⁶ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT commander, July 2008. Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer, August 2008 and February 2009.

harassing and robbing members of rival tribes.²³⁷ In mid 2005, the provincial police chief fled to Helmand with most of the force's trucks and weapons. There were no US training teams for the police until early 2007.²³⁸ In addition to the police, there was a semi-official highway patrol, led by a local strongman named Mullah Yahya. It was made up of local tribesmen who also extorted money from travelers. It was more heavily armed than the local police. The border police, living in poorly supported isolated positions, did little to stop smugglers, and were dependent on Iranian border officials for necessities such as water.²³⁹

USAID had some quick-impact projects clustered around Farah city done through sub-contractors. It also established an Afghan bank.²⁴⁰ The Louis Berger Group, a US company which held the main contract for the Ring Road, built eight schools in Farah in 2005.²⁴¹ The PRT built several schools (co-educational or girls' schools) too, as well as several clinics and the province's first blood bank. Other than the Ring Road, there were only two miles of paved road in Farah at the end of 2005.²⁴²

The UN and most NGOs considered Farah too dangerous to operate in because of the rampant criminality along major roads. Local militias frequently robbed and sometimes killed aid workers and sub-contractors driving expensive SUVs.²⁴³ In December 2003, a group of Afghans working on a UN sponsored census project was ambushed near the border with Nimruz province; one person was killed and 11 wounded.²⁴⁴ In early 2004, unknown gunmen killed four members of an NGO mine clearance team on the road to Farah city.²⁴⁵ Several NGO officials were killed in 2005 and 2006 as well. In March 2006, an Afghan engineer working for the National Solidarity Program and UN-HABITAT was dragged out of his car and shot in Bala Baluk district.²⁴⁶ Bandits rarely bothered the Farah PRT with its armored Humvees and platoon of Army National Guard.²⁴⁷

Political Dynamics

Not much is known about the political dynamics in Farah during the early years of the war. One can say that tension existed between the Barakzai and Noorzai tribes. Members of the Barakzai tribe – the minority tribe within Farah – controlled many government positions at the provincial and district levels – a cause of tension with the majority Noorzai.²⁴⁸ Barakzai

²³⁷ Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander, September and October 2008.

²³⁸ Only a fraction of the police who existed on paper actually existed or showed up for work. Many did not wear their uniforms, and were loyal only to their fellow tribesmen. In early fall 2007, the provincial police chief, Gen. Sarjang, disbanded all police who did not have a national identity card, cutting the force down to fewer than 400. Interviews with members of the 2007 Farah PMT and ETT, October 2008. Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander, July and August 2008, February 2009.

²³⁹ Interview with 2005-06 Farah State Department field officer. Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT commander. Interview with Aug-Oct 2005 State Department election observer, February 2009.

²⁴⁰ Interview with 2006 Farah USAID field officer, March 2009.

²⁴¹ Interview with Louis Berger Group Vice President and former project director for Kabul-Kandahar section of the Ring Road, March 2009.

²⁴² Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT commander.

²⁴³ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT commander.

²⁴⁴ UNHCR, "Chronology of Events in Afghanistan", December 2003.

²⁴⁵ USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) field report, February 2004.

²⁴⁶ "UN-HABITAT Contractor Murdered in Afghanistan", UN-HABITAT feature story, 6 March 2006.

²⁴⁷ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT commander.

²⁴⁸ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

officials would often use their power to benefit their fellow tribesmen at the expense of the Noorzai and other tribes. For example, in Bakwa in 2006, the PRT allowed the Barakzai district governor to pick the sites for wells and other projects, which he placed only on the lands of his fellow tribesmen.²⁴⁹ There were Barakzai in the provincial council who used central government funds in a similar fashion.²⁵⁰

The most powerful warlord in the area was probably Amanullah Khan, a Noorzai leader based in the Pashtun-dominated Zerikoh valley in southern Herat whose power extended into central Farah. Much of his influence came from Pashtun grievances against Tajik forces that controlled the Herat government. Amanullah also had ties to former Taliban commanders, but was known to keep his distance from the movement.²⁵¹

Amanullah Khan was a long-time rival of Ismail Khan, the Tajik governor and militia commander in Herat. The two warlords fought off and on from 2002-2004.²⁵² In August 2004, Arif Noorzai, the minister of tribal and border affairs, and several other Karzai government ministers, allied with Amanullah to break Ismail Khan's hold over Herat.²⁵³ Amanullah's forces launched an unprovoked attack on the Shindand airbase in southern Herat in mid August; the fighting soon spread to within 18 miles of Herat city.²⁵⁴ Local security guards protecting workers on the Ring Road were caught up in the fighting as well, and some 30-40 were killed.²⁵⁵ Karzai sent in 1,500 Afghan army troops. Ismail Khan was later removed as the governor of Herat.²⁵⁶

After the 2004 clashes, Amanullah Khan apparently gave up on trying to expand his influence north into Herat. He retained his base in the Zerikoh valley from which he projected power south into central Farah, resulting in clashes with Barakzai tribesmen under Arbab Bashir, a friend of Ismail Khan. Amanullah was reportedly killed in a clash with Bashir's militia in late October 2006.²⁵⁷ The Taliban quickly exploited his death and cultivated relations with his sons, who were known to be more impressionable than their father. Thereafter, many Noorzai of Farah and southern Herat were looked on as allies of the Taliban.²⁵⁸

²⁴⁹ Interview with 2006 Farah PRT USAID field officer.

²⁵⁰ Interview with 2006-07 Farah PRT commander.

²⁵¹ Interview with Afghanistan analyst at State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), February 2009.

²⁵² Frank Clements, *Conflict in Afghanistan*, p. 269.

²⁵³ "Afghan Warlord Closes in on Prize City", *Times Online*, 25 August 2004.

²⁵⁴ Amy Waldman, "Afghan Strife Exposes Deep and Wide Ethnic Tensions", *The New York Times*, 6 September 2004. "Afghan Warlord Closes in on Prize City", *Times Online*, 25 August 2004. "Rivals in Western Afghanistan Agreed to a Cease-fire", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 23 August 2004.

²⁵⁵ The guards were attacked by Ismail Khan's forces around southern Herat or northern Farah – probably because the guards were associated with Amanullah's Khan's militia. Interview with project director for Kandahar-Herat section of the Ring Road.

²⁵⁶ "Karzai Fires Herat Warlord Ismail Khan", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 14 September 2004.

²⁵⁷ MK Bhadrakumar, "NATO Fighting the Wrong Battle in Afghanistan", *Asia Times Online*, 6 November 2006.

²⁵⁸ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander. Interview with Afghanistan analyst at the Department of State/INR.

Poppy

In 2005, opium cultivation in Farah more than tripled – due mainly to deteriorating economic conditions among the province’s small farmers. In 2004-2005, there was a drought. Around the same time, the World Food Program began importing processed wheat flour from Pakistan, which caused the price of wheat to fall. Hundreds of farmers in Bakwa, a major wheat growing area that now produces large quantities of opium, went bankrupt, as did wheat growers in several other districts. Narcotics traffickers from Nimruz exploited the situation, offering farmers generous cash advances in exchange for growing poppy, which requires less water. Many farmers became indebted to the traffickers, and faced death threats if they stopped growing poppy. The PRT held many shuras with local farmers hoping to convince them to stop growing opium, but to no avail; the farmers repeatedly said that they needed the money to feed their families, and that wheat had become too expensive to grow.²⁵⁹

Paving of the Ring Road

Early US activity in Farah revolved around the construction of two major highways. In 2004-2006, USAID paid the Louis Berger Group to pave and widen the Kandahar-Herat section of the Ring Road, which passed through Farah, as well as Highway 517, which connects the Ring Road to Farah city. The crew chiefs hired locals for unskilled labor, mainly for stone masonry work. Several villages along the road doubled or tripled in size as a result of the influx of cash.²⁶⁰

The Louis Berger Group sub-contracted the security of its personnel to United States Protection and Investigations (USPI), which hired local security guards along the route. As the road progressed through Helmand into Farah, attacks on the construction crews increased. The crews ran into IEDs and increasingly sophisticated ambushes by insurgents on motorcycles. Highway 517 through Bala Baluk district was particularly dangerous. Insurgents shot and killed a USPI contractor in August 2005, and kidnapped and beheaded another in September. In early 2006 two engineers were murdered, and several USPI contractors were killed in an IED attack on Highway 517. Some of these attacks were by committed insurgents, but many were associated with local power struggles or attempts to rob USPI vehicles carrying cash to pay local guards.²⁶¹

In response, USPI hired more local security guards. In order to do so, USPI personnel held shuras with local leaders and power-brokers, as well as district officials. Unlike Herat, which was ruled by the powerful warlord and governor Ismail Khan, Farah was a lawless place controlled by numerous local strongmen. By the time construction was complete, USPI had hired 250-500 local guards in Farah.²⁶² These guards often stood and fought, and were well regarded by the construction crews.²⁶³

²⁵⁹ Interview with 2006 Farah PRT USAID field officer. Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

²⁶⁰ Interview with Louis Berger Group senior vice president and former project director for Kandahar-Herat section of the Ring Road, 24 March 2009.

²⁶¹ Interview with former project director for Kandahar-Herat section of the Ring Road.

²⁶² Along the entire stretch of the Kandahar-Herat road, USPI hired as many as 2,000 local guards operating out of four or five separate compounds. Interview with former project director for Kandahar-Herat section of the Ring Road.

²⁶³ Interview with 2006 Farah USAID field officer.

The Louis Berger Group built small, fortified outposts along the highway, which served as temporary bases for its construction crews.²⁶⁴ One of these was at a village called De Tut, about 30 kilometers south of the Ring Road-Highway 517 junction. When the roadwork was complete, USPI left the De Tut compound to the local security guards, some of whom then used these compounds as bases from which to extort money from travelers on the Farah section of the Ring Road and Highway 517. These gunmen, led by Mullah Yahya, also targeted the PRT's supply convoys and trucks operated by the World Food Program. Yahya later became a major power-broker in and around Delaram, a strategically important town on the Ring Road near the border with Helmand.²⁶⁵

2006-2007

Expansion of the Insurgency

In mid 2006, British forces started operating in Helmand.²⁶⁶ Many insurgents then started using Farah as a refuge.²⁶⁷ With so few government forces to stop their advance, the Taliban soon became more aggressive. They formed alliances with drug traffickers and co-opted local leaders, especially among disaffected Noorzai tribesmen, many of whom had supported the Taliban in the 1990s. As the Taliban consolidated its power and built up its strength, attacks on US and Afghan forces increased in number and scale.²⁶⁸

In late 2006, the Taliban moved into the remote mountains of Gulistan and Pur Chaman in northeastern Farah, infiltrating villages, threatening elders, and setting up firing positions and camps outside villages and towns.²⁶⁹ The Gulistan and Pur Chaman valleys were at least four hours by road from the main highway and easy for insurgents to defend. In Gulistan, there was some resistance to the Taliban presence by Barakzai tribesmen associated with the district governor.²⁷⁰ In September 2006, insurgents looted and burned down the Gulistan district center after a brief clash in which one policeman was killed. Local tribal elders then negotiated with the Taliban, which agreed to allow the police to return.²⁷¹

At the same time, the Taliban moved west into Bala Baluk district in central Farah. In late 2006, attacks on Afghan National Army and police in Bala Baluk escalated to the point that the Farah PRT asked for additional support from RC West. A 100-man Spanish quick

²⁶⁴ Interview with Louis Berger Group vice president and former project director for Kabul-Kandahar section of the Ring Road. Interview with 2006 Farah USAID field officer.

²⁶⁵ Interview with members of 2007 Farah PMT and 2007 Farah ETT. Interviews with 2006 Farah USAID field officer, and 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

²⁶⁶ Interview with 2007-08 PRT Farah intelligence officer.

²⁶⁷ Interview with members of 2007 Farah PMT and 2007 Farah ETT. Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer.

²⁶⁸ Interviews with Farah PRT commanders, State Department and USAID field officers. See also Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 5.

²⁶⁹ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer.

²⁷⁰ Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander.

²⁷¹ "Afghan forces retake district HQ", *BBC News*, 15 September 2006. "In the Cross-Hairs: A Chronology of Farah Province's Deteriorating Security", *Afgha.com*, 23 March 2007.

reaction force was dispatched from Herat to Farah where it did some drive-through patrols.²⁷²

In early 2007, the Taliban moved in strength into the flat southeastern district of Bakwa, Farah's major poppy growing area where there was almost no government presence. In February, a small group of about 11 insurgents took over the district center. The Afghan army and their US trainers then re-took the district center and established a garrison that was later reinforced with additional police.²⁷³ In late March, the soldiers abandoned the garrison, and the insurgents returned and consolidated their control.²⁷⁴ The RC West commander did not see Bakwa, which was far from a major paved road and was difficult to reinforce if attacked, as sufficiently important strategically to warrant continued manning of the garrison. There had also been several IED explosions on the road leading into the district; one in particular killed 13 policemen.²⁷⁵

Through the first half of 2007, there was a steady increase in IED attacks along Highway 517, which runs through Bala Baluk in central Farah. Most struck Afghan army and police vehicles. The Taliban enjoyed particularly strong support in the town of Shewan, known to be deeply hostile to US and Afghan forces. Taliban commanders in the area had ties to the insurgency in Helmand. Many Taliban commanders around Shewan were from the Alizai tribe; many Alizai tribesmen had migrated from Helmand to Farah a century earlier but retained ties there.²⁷⁶

In early July, the Afghan army and police accompanied by their US trainers launched a large cordon-and-search operation in Siah Jangal, a village near Shewan, where they found several small IED factories.²⁷⁷ That same day, the Afghan army commander decided to organize an impromptu shura in Shewan involving Noorzai, Barakzai, and Alizai leaders; significant numbers of people from all three tribes lived in or near Shewan. The idea was to get the rival tribes to allow an army garrison in the town. But only a handful of inconsequential Noorzai elders actually turned up. The rest stayed away, knowing that the town's insurgents were planning a major attack. While soldiers and police waited for more leaders to show, they noticed civilians discreetly leaving the town. A large contingent of police patrolling elsewhere in the town – and reportedly looting several houses – then came under fire; some 16 were killed and their vehicles burned. Moments later, as many as 200 insurgents armed with heavy weapons and led by a seasoned Mujahideen commander opened fire from a fortified compound on a hill surrounded by trees. The insurgents continued to fight through several airstrikes, but eventually withdrew after repeated bombings.²⁷⁸ The next day, a local tribal

²⁷² Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer. Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT commander.

²⁷³ "Afghan, NATO Troops Retake Taliban-held Western District", *Eurasia Digest*, 20 February 2007. Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander.

²⁷⁴ Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander.

²⁷⁵ Interview with members of 2007 Farah PMT and 2007 Farah ETT.

²⁷⁶ "Farah Province: The New Focus of the Taliban Insurgency", *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, 10 December 2007.

²⁷⁷ Interview with members of 2007 Farah PMT and 2007 Farah ETT.

²⁷⁸ Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander, and with several other members of the ETT. Just over a year later in on 8 August 2008, insurgents launched an attack of similar magnitude on US Marines patrolling in Shewan. The Marines had apparently interrupted a meeting of high-level Taliban commanders. See "Marines Prevailed in a Day of Battle", *Military.com*, 3 December 2008.

leader told the press that over 100 civilians had been killed in airstrikes in Shewan.²⁷⁹ US forces later conducted a series of clearing operations in Shewan that encountered little resistance. In August, a company of Italian troops set up a garrison six kilometers south of the town but left in September, leaving a small contingent of Afghan army to man the post.²⁸⁰

In late October 2007, a large group of hardcore insurgents moved into Farah from Helmand in preparation for a major Taliban offensive. Many drove openly down the Ring Road wearing black turbans and carrying weapons, and rested briefly in Delaram, the major truck stop between Helmand and Farah.²⁸¹ Some went to Bakwa; the rest drove north up the Gulistan valley where they set up numerous ambush sites on the high ground above the river manned by several hundred insurgents. On 29 October, insurgents attacked the district center, killing as many as 20 police and beheading a number of others, including several family members and supporters of the district governor, Haji Qasim. The beheadings may have been revenge for the hanging of a local Taliban supporter by the district government.²⁸² Qasim and the district police chief, Rahmatullah, fled.²⁸³

US and Afghan forces scrambled to respond. On 30 October, a quick reaction force made up of some 70-80 Afghan army and police and 20-30 US trainers in armored Humvees left for Gulistan. Fearing IEDs along the main road up the valley, the convoy went down a long and difficult mountain path, and entered the valley during the early morning hours of 31 October. As they rounded a bend with the sun in their eyes, they were hit with a volley of mortars, RPGs, and small arms fire that killed a truck full of policemen at the head of the convoy. The convoy then turned around and moved south down the river, pursued by the insurgents and pummeled by several additional ambushes. Some 20 Afghan soldiers and police were killed, and one US soldier was wounded.²⁸⁴ A week later, US and Afghan forces re-took the Gulistan district center, but left in late November. The Taliban then burned the district center to the ground and fled back into the mountains.²⁸⁵

On the same day that the convoy was ambushed in Gulistan, insurgents attacked the Bakwa district center and destroyed the abandoned garrison.²⁸⁶ Insurgents then looted and burned the Khak-e-Safed district center north of Farah city after police conducted a “tactical

²⁷⁹ Barry Bearak, “Tribal Chief Says NATO Airstrike Killed 108 Afghan Civilians”, *New York Times*, 8 July 2007. Ahmad Qureshi, “Over 100 Civilian Casualties Alleged in Farah Airstrike of US-led Coalition”, *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 7 July 2007.

²⁸⁰ Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander.

²⁸¹ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

²⁸² “Afghan Daily Blames Lack of Well-equipped Police for Loss of Districts”, *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, 26 November 2007.

²⁸³ Qasim was not reinstated until April 2008 when he was flown in by helicopter to the Gulistan district center. “Governance Returns to Gulistan”, ISAF press release, 29 April 2008. Interview with 2008 Farah PRT commander, 25 February 2009.

²⁸⁴ Interviews with members of the 2007 Farah ETT, the 2007 Farah PMT commander, and the 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

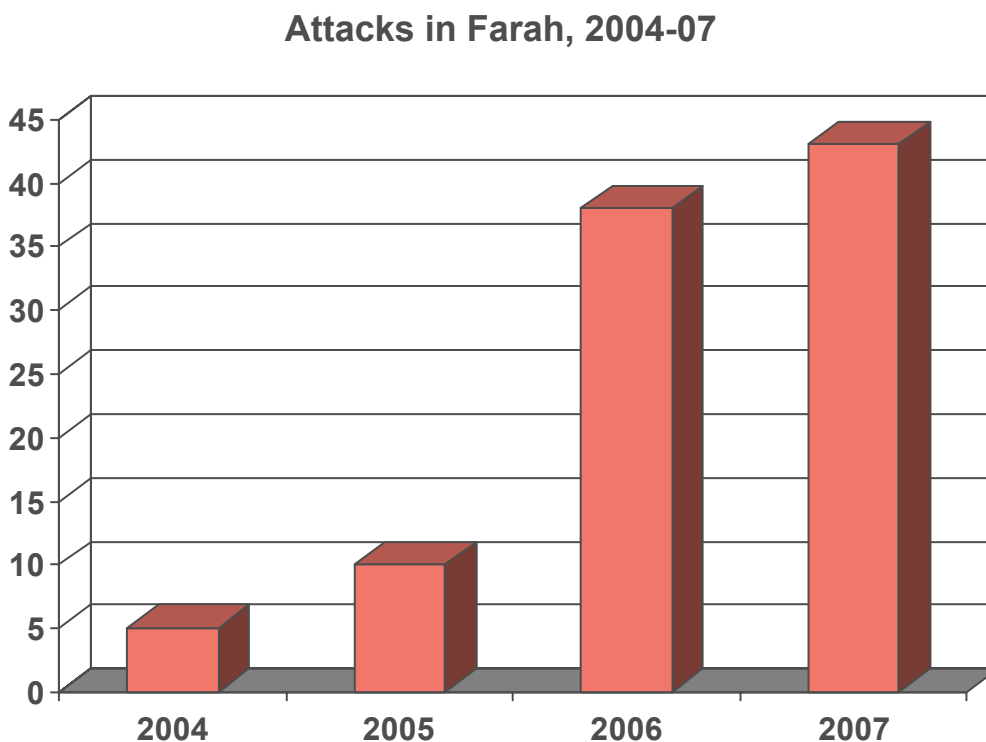
²⁸⁵ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

²⁸⁶ Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander.

retreat”.²⁸⁷ The RC West commander then ordered a large operation to re-take the Bakwa district center, which involved four companies of Italian and Spanish troops and all three kandaks from the Afghan army’s 207th Corps. Unfortunately, an IED and a large insurgent defending force compelled the convoy to turn back near the district center.²⁸⁸

These attacks on district centers, covered in the national or international press, called attention to the Taliban’s growing political power in Farah – even though many of them were nothing more than a handful of buildings in the middle of nowhere.²⁸⁹ At Bakwa and Khak-e-Safed, the police made little if any attempt to stand and fight. Serving in the district government in such isolated areas increasingly controlled by the Taliban was a dangerous proposition. District police did not have the capability to defend against a serious attack. Many district officials cut deals with the insurgents in order to survive.²⁹⁰ In some districts – especially Bakwa and Gulistan – there was no district government for long periods. When district governors were appointed, they often stayed in Farah city.²⁹¹

Figure 3) Attacks in Farah, 2004-2007



Source: National Counterterrorism Center

²⁸⁷ “Taliban Briefly Capture Western Afghan District”, *Agence France Presse*, 5 November 2007. Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander. The attackers made off with most of the weapons and ammunition in the police garrison.

²⁸⁸ Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander.

²⁸⁹ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT intelligence officer.

²⁹⁰ Interview with members of 2007 Farah police mentor team (PMT) and Embedded Training Team (ETT). Note: PMTs train the police, ETTs the Afghan army.

²⁹¹ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander. Interview with 2008 Farah PRT commander.

Due to the deteriorating security situation, Farah remained off limits for the UN and most NGOs through much of 2006 and 2007.²⁹² Other than the PRT and USAID sub-contractors, the only other entity doing substantial reconstruction work was India's Border Roads Organization (BRO), which was working on the Bakshabad Dam in Bala Baluk district, as well as a road from Delaram through Nimruz to the Iranian border. BRO personnel were constantly under attack. The PRT rescued BRO engineers on several occasions.²⁹³ The deteriorating security situation caused the United States to abandon numerous reconstruction projects in eastern Farah. For example, the PRT had gone to Gulistan twice in 2006 in order to set up an agricultural assistance program to help the area's farmers grow apples, Gulistan's major export crop. The program was later abandoned due to security concerns.²⁹⁴ A clinic built in Bakwa, a district the PRT visited frequently in 2006, was later closed down after it was attacked and the staff received night letters.²⁹⁵ Of six schools built in Bakwa in 2007, four were reportedly abandoned after threats by insurgents.²⁹⁶ By 2008, the situation in Bakwa had deteriorated to the point that the PRT considered it too dangerous to travel there. Despite the worsening security situation, the PRT was rarely attacked, probably because it posed little threat to insurgents and drug traffickers.²⁹⁷

Extortion and Corruption

Militia leaders and corrupt police continued to extort money from travelers, and fought constantly over the proceeds of illegal tolls and informal taxes on the poppy trade. Corrupt officials who did not share their proceeds with the right people were removed and sometimes killed. The police remained notorious for looting the villages of rival tribes.²⁹⁸ There were also many robberies and kidnappings for ransom by local bandits who claimed to be Taliban. In July 2006, the Farah provincial customs chief, who was known to take money in exchange for waiving duties on trade, was kidnapped for ransom, severely beaten, and then released after his family paid a \$100,000 ransom.²⁹⁹ In mid 2007, a German national was kidnapped and released in exchange for \$40,000.³⁰⁰ From 2006-2007, nearly half the trucks supplying the PRT in Farah were hijacked.³⁰¹ In December, gunmen killed 15 Afghan guards protecting a convoy of fuel tankers on the Ring Road, and made away with one of the trucks.³⁰²

²⁹² Interview with 2006-07 Farah PRT commander, July 2008.

²⁹³ Interview with 2006-07 Farah PRT commander.

²⁹⁴ Interview with 2006 Farah PRT USAID field officer. Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer.

²⁹⁵ Interview with 2006 Farah PRT USAID field officer.

²⁹⁶ Gina Gillespie, "Security Shura in Delaram", *Northern Star*, February 2008, p.7.

²⁹⁷ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander, 2006-07 Farah PRT commander, 2005-06 Farah PRT State department field officer.

²⁹⁸ Interview with members of 2007 Farah PMT and 2007 Farah ETT.

²⁹⁹ "Abducted Customs Chief Released in Western Afghanistan", *Radio Free Europe*, July 28, 2006.

³⁰⁰ "German Freed in Afghanistan: Interior Ministry", *ABC News*, July 5, 2007. The provincial governor claimed the kidnappers were Taliban, but local Taliban commanders denied involvement.

³⁰¹ Interview with 2006-07 Farah PRT commander.

³⁰² "15 Afghan Employees of US Company Killed", *CBS News*, 18 December 2007. The guards were working for USPI.

In late 2006, there were demonstrations in Farah city protesting banditry on the province's roads and corruption in the police force. Many of the protesters were Farah city merchants whose livelihoods depended on the safe transit of goods. Soon after, Farah Governor Ezatullah Wasefi was replaced. Wasefi's successor, Abdul Samad Stanakzai and the provincial police chief, Brigadier General Sayed Agha Saqib, launched a crack-down on highway robbery, yet the practice continued.³⁰³

Throughout 2007, the next provincial governor, Maulawi Mohideen Baluch, allowed Mullah Yahya, a former Mujahideen leader who commanded a 300-man militia of local tribesmen, to extort money from truckers on the Ring Road – with the understanding that Yahya's men would take care of Taliban if they found them.³⁰⁴ Yahya's control over parts of the Ring Road was a cause of tension with corrupt elements of the provincial police for whom illegal tolls were a major source of revenue. Yahya and the police also fought over control of Delaram, the major transit point for goods (licit and illicit) moving between Farah and Helmand, and over the distribution of revenue from informal taxes on smuggled opium and fuel. In September 2007 – after an argument between Yahya and the new and notoriously corrupt provincial police chief, General Sarjang – 100 of Yahya's men surrounded the Delaram district center and threatened to kill all the police inside. Later that year, Yahya was murdered. Soon after, there was a series of vendetta killings by Yahya's men.³⁰⁵

Competition between the Barakzai and Noorzai persisted as well. Over the last three years, a small group of Barakzai with government connections have kidnapped many Noorzai and Alizai tribesmen and held them for ransom. Members of the kidnapping ring have been arrested several times and released.³⁰⁶ In 2007, the Farah PRT held several large shuras involving leaders from the Noorzai and Barakzai tribes. The fighting stopped briefly, but quickly resumed.³⁰⁷

Narcotics

Poppy cultivation in Farah went from almost nothing (500 hectares) in 2002 to 15,010 hectares in 2008 (see Figure 4). Farah was second only to Helmand in poppy cultivation in 2008, which had 103,590 hectares under cultivation.³⁰⁸ A significant number of parliamentarians in Kabul owned opium fields in Farah in 2006.³⁰⁹ Drug traffickers moved at will, often in large, heavily armed convoys. Afghan border police did little to interdict the narcotics trade. Corrupt officials on the Iranian side of the border were lenient as well.³¹⁰

³⁰³ Many bandits presented themselves as Taliban in order to frighten their victims. "Residents Concerned over Lawlessness," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 11 February 2007. Around the same time, US officials in Afghanistan became aware that Wasefi had been convicted of heroin trafficking in the US during the late 1980s. Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department representative.

³⁰⁴ Mullah Yahya was reportedly from around the Deh Tut area along the Ring Road, where the highway turns west towards Bala Baluk. Yahya was apparently close to Governor Baluch, and may have provided security for the governor on occasion. Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander.

³⁰⁵ Interview with 2007 Farah ETT commander. Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander. Interview with 2008 Farah PRT commander.

³⁰⁶ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

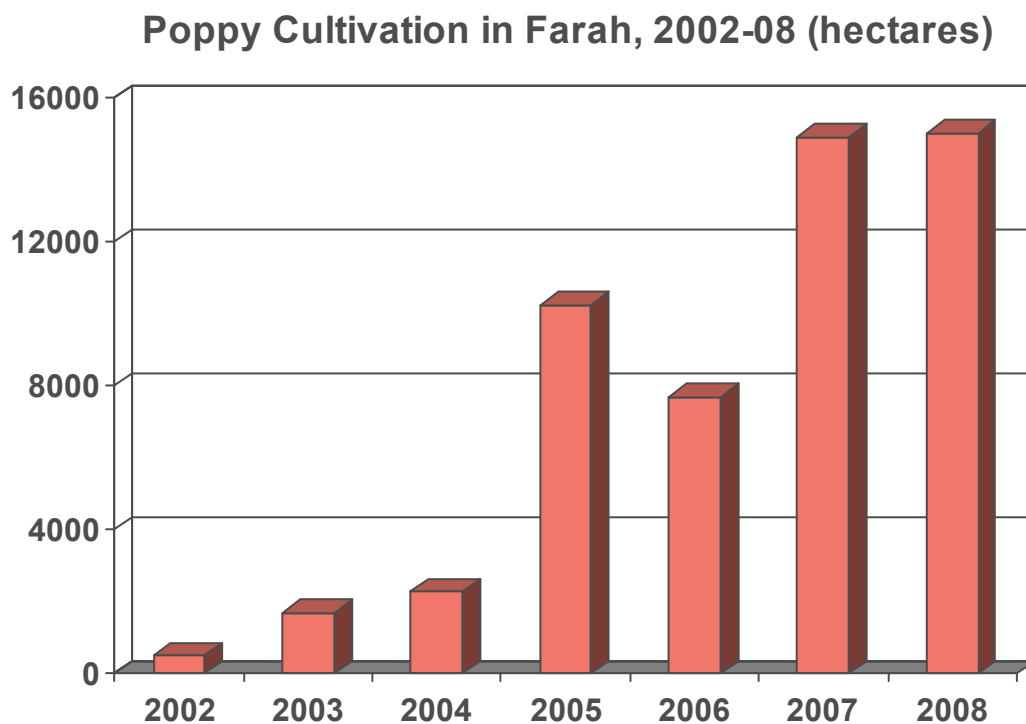
³⁰⁷ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

³⁰⁸ UNODC, Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008.

³⁰⁹ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer.

³¹⁰ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Dept field officer, 24 February 2009.

Figure 4) Poppy cultivation in Farah, 2002-08 (hectares)



Source: UNODC, Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008

It was often impossible for US forces to distinguish between heavily armed narcotics traffickers and ideologically driven insurgents.³¹¹ Both operated underground and attacked soldiers and police who got in their way. The Taliban drew most of its support from Noorzai tribesmen, who also controlled much of Farah's drug trade. As the Taliban expanded its influence in Farah, it formed alliances with drug traffickers and poppy farmers who paid the Taliban a share of their profits in exchange for protection.³¹²

Many attacks on US and Afghan forces were by drug smugglers attempting to protect trafficking routes and poppy fields. In 2006 and 2007, attacks on government forces involved in eradication were frequent, but those on the PRT were few.³¹³ Insurgents and drug traffickers in Bakwa district, Farah's major poppy-growing region, worked together to lay IEDs along Highway 522, an unpaved road that links Delaram and Farah city. Most of the casualties from these IED attacks were Afghan army and police travelling in unarmored vehicles.³¹⁴ It is likely that the traffickers paid insurgents to plant these bombs as a means to keep US and Afghan forces away from the district's poppy fields and trafficking routes.³¹⁵

³¹¹ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT commander.

³¹² Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

³¹³ Interview with 2006-07 Farah PRT commander.

³¹⁴ Interview with members of 2007 Farah PMT and 2007 Farah ETT.

³¹⁵ Interview with 2008 Farah PRT commander, February 2009.

Most poppy in Farah is cultivated in areas with little or no government presence, often controlled by the Taliban.³¹⁶

During the early years of the war, the US military left the drug traffickers alone. In 2007, the Farah PRT was required to report fields larger than 100 square meters.³¹⁷ Government eradication programs in 2007 and 2008 destroyed less than one percent of Farah's poppy fields. Officials involved in the program were known to take bribes from opium farmers in exchange for promises that their fields would not be eradicated. In Gulistan district, small farmers paid \$400 per year to corrupt officials to keep their poppy fields from being reported.³¹⁸ Some farmers in Bakwa told the PRT they did not mind eradication because it drove up the price of poppy, sometimes three-fold.³¹⁹

There is not much specific information on the connection between narcotics traffickers and government officials in Farah. Yet, it was a widely accepted fact that officials at all levels took a cut of the opium trade in exchange for giving traffickers a free rein. Ezatullah Wasefi, Farah's governor from July 2005 to December 2006, was linked to the narcotics trade. Wasefi's father was from Kandahar, and was a close friend of President Karzai. Wasefi had spent several years in a Nevada prison in the 1980s for heroin trafficking.³²⁰ The provincial police chief during Wasefi's tenure had a cleaner reputation, but was later suspected of selling seized poppy.³²¹ Maulawi Mohideen Baluch, Farah's governor from early 2007 through early 2008, was also suspected of ties to the drug trade.³²²

Iran

Some weapons have found their way from Iran to the Taliban, many of them Chinese-made, including anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. There have also been news reports that Iran supplied surface-to-air missiles capable of shooting down US helicopters.³²³ This movement of weapons from the west was likely driven by a combination of deliberate state policy in Iran – which may have an interest in tying down US forces, even if it does not want the Taliban to return to power – and the for-profit weapons trade between Iranian smugglers and cash-rich insurgents and narcotics traffickers.³²⁴ The Afghan government made little headway interdicting these weapons. In early 2006, two Afghan intelligence officers were beheaded and their bodies left in the desert while on a mission near the Iranian border in western Farah.³²⁵

³¹⁶ “Farah Province: The New Focus of the Taliban Insurgency”, *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, 10 December 2007.

³¹⁷ Mathew Morgan, “A Flourishing Narco-economy”, *military.com*. The author had visited the Farah PRT in 2007.

³¹⁸ UNODC, *Afghanistan's Drug Industry*, p. 69.

³¹⁹ Mathew Morgan, “A Flourishing Narco-economy”, *military.com*. The effect of such a rise on street prices in the US and Europe is minimal, but the effect on the insurgency and local economy in Bakwa is substantial.

³²⁰ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer, 1 August 2008. “Karzai's Brother World's Biggest Heroin Supplier”, *The Seoul Times*, 7 August 2008.

³²¹ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer.

³²² Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

³²³ Michael Smith, “Iran Gives Taliban Helicopter Missile”, *The Sunday Times*, 1 March 2009.

³²⁴ Interview with 2007-08 Farah PRT commander.

³²⁵ “Two Intelligence Agents Beheaded in Afghanistan”, *Middle East Times*, 1 February 2006.

There was considerable trade in licit goods between Iran and Farah. The bazaars in Farah city were full of cheap Iranian consumer goods. Fuel also came across the border in large quantities – some of it sold in Farah city, the rest farther east in Helmand and Kandahar. The Afghan border police rarely collected customs duties on goods coming from Iran. They depended on their Iranian counterparts for water and other essentials, which Iranian officials provided on the condition that the Afghan border police allow Iranian goods to pass into Afghanistan without paying customs duties.³²⁶

In the fall of 2006, Iranian officials came to Farah to propose a series of projects to the provincial government. These projects included schools, vocational centers, electricity, power lines, and roads – including a paved highway from the Iranian border to Farah city. Iran also funded numerous small-scale irrigation projects and wells. Provincial officials tended to be receptive to Iranian aid, partly because Farah received so little from the central government or the Coalition.³²⁷ In December 2005, Farah governor Ezatullah Wasefi visited Iran; when he returned, he claimed that Iran was committed to expanding trade ties with Farah.³²⁸

Districts farther west, especially those near the Iranian border, were quiet in 2005-2007, and remain so today. Remote villages in southwest Farah received the PRT warmly on several occasions. There have been few attacks in these areas and few reports of insurgent activity compared to farther east. Farah city, most of whose inhabitants speak Dari (a dialect of Farsi) and have cultural connections to Iran, has remained relatively safe.³²⁹ Nearly one-third of the people living in western Farah have lived and worked in Iran. Iranian imams have occasionally given sermons in the city's mosques.³³⁰

Conclusion

The situation in mid 2008 in Farah remained uneasy. Police were corrupt, governance was poor, and insurgents controlled many rural areas. The Taliban gained their position in Farah because of the scarcity of Afghan and Coalition forces, government misrule, and ongoing feuds over power and money. Rampant corruption and outright criminality among government officials created opportunities for the Taliban to turn people against the government. Tensions between the minority Barakzai, who controlled much of the provincial government, and the majority Noorzai created rifts that the Taliban could exploit, as did competition among various powerbrokers over control of illegal checkpoints and taxes on the poppy trade. Scarcity of forces meant there was no one to challenge the Taliban. Once fighting escalated in southern Afghanistan it was natural and easy for insurgents under pressure from British operations in Helmand to take refuge in Farah. With so few forces in Farah to stop any incursion, it was perhaps inevitable that the Taliban would re-establish itself there.

³²⁶ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer.

³²⁷ Interview with 2006 Farah PRT USAID field officer.

³²⁸ “Afghan Governor Says Iran Plans Roads, Power Lines in Western Provinces”, *Radio Free Europe*, December 29, 2005.

³²⁹ Interview with members of 2007 Farah PMT and 2007 Farah ETT. Interview with 2005-06 Farah Department of State field officer, 2007-08 PRT commander, and 2008 Farah PRT commander.

³³⁰ Interview with 2005-06 Farah PRT State Department field officer.

Final Thoughts

We have now reviewed the major events of the war in southern and western Afghanistan since 2001. The hopes of 2001 have disappeared. The government is weak, its police forces abusive, its decisions despised. The Taliban have re-emerged, held back only at great cost by the Coalition forces outposting Helmand, Kandahar, and Farah. The Coalition and the Marines have a tough road ahead.

Does this mean the war is unwinnable? That assessment cannot be made at this point. There is simply not enough information. The situation is not bad enough to say that defeat is inevitable, or even highly likely. Too many counterinsurgencies have fallen apart only after the military situation became far worse; the South Vietnamese in 1974 or the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1988, for example. Of course, other counterinsurgencies have been defeated under far better conditions; the French in Algeria in 1960, the Rhodesians in 1980, for example. It is common to say that the safe haven in Pakistan will make counterinsurgency very difficult, if not impossible. Yet insurgencies in Iraq, Colombia, and Oman were all dealt serious blows in spite of the existence of a nearby safe haven. All this can only leave us undecided. Perhaps if Kandahar was about to fall, Coalition outposts were being overrun, and insurgents were moving on Kabul, or if mass protests were breaking out across the United States, we could say with some certainty that the war is lost. But that is not the case today. The counterinsurgency is difficult but is not necessarily doomed to defeat.

So what insights does history give us about the way ahead? A narrative history such as this cannot truly recommend the right strategy but it can certainly help inform strategy.

First, it is hard to read the history and not leave with the impression that more forces would be useful. The ease with which the Taliban returned to the south, the besieging of the British and Canadian forces in their lonely outposts, the travails of Musa Qala, and Taliban shadow government all stem partly from a scarcity of forces.

Second, any strategy ought to consider how the Coalition can improve its counterinsurgency techniques. The Coalition took too many years to get to the holding and building and the advisory effort necessary for success. Even today collateral damage remains a major concern. Our air strikes and house searches may be offending potential allies and pushing them into the arms of the Taliban.

Finally, it is hard to see how lasting success will be achieved without addressing government misrule. Fixing abusive, corrupt, and biased government leaders and police is no easy task. But it is not impossible. Advisors can mentor. Money can be used to induce better behavior. Bad leaders can be removed. Good leaders can be promoted. Local government bodies can be restructured. Nothing underlies the rise of the insurgency in southern and western Afghanistan as much as government misrule.

These insights may sound negative. To an extent they are, but there is cause for optimism. For if the difficulties in Afghanistan come partly from our own mistakes, or those of the Afghan government, then better decisions may be able to improve the situation. Victory is not assured. Neither is defeat.

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