

THE BLEEDING ULCER: THE MAGTF, ISAF, AND GIROA  
DURING OPERATION MOSHTARAK

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE  
Military History

by

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<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>			<i>Form Approved</i> <i>OMB No. 0704-0188</i>		
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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 10-06-2022		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master's Thesis		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> AUG 2021 – JUN 2022	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b>  The Bleeding Ulcer: The MAGTF, ISAF, and GIRoA during Operation Moshtarak			<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>		
			<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>		
			<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>		
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>  Maj Benjamin M. Van Horrick, USMCR			<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>		
			<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>		
			<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>		
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301			<b>8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER</b>		
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>			<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>		
			<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>		
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b>					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>  Operation Moshtarak was the largest military operation in Afghanistan since the start of America's war in Afghanistan. This thesis argues the complex clearing of Marjah, Afghanistan, displayed the unique abilities of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) construct, demonstrated by the leadership of the Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan (MEB-A). The tactical and operational successes did not satisfy the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) need for a quick, decisive victory in Marjah. Due to external political pressure, ISAF required a set-piece battle to justify its shift to a counterinsurgency strategy and the surge force allocated to implement the strategy. Finally, once the Marines cleared Marjah, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) failed to provide basic services to Marjah residents, slowing MEB-A's operational momentum.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> MAGTF, Marine Corps, Operation Enduring Freedom, Helmand Counterinsurgency, Afghanistan Sure					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b>	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b>	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b>			<b>19b. PHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b>
(U)	(U)	(U)	(U)	114	

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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## ABSTRACT

THE BLEEDING ULCER: THE MAGTF, ISAF, AND GIROA DURING OPERATION MOSHTARAK, by Maj Benjamin M. Van Horrick, 114 pages.

Operation Moshtarak was the largest military operation in Afghanistan since the start of the America's war in Afghanistan. This thesis argues the complex clearing of Marjah, Afghanistan, displayed the unique abilities of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) construct, demonstrated by the leadership of the Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan (MEB-A). The tactical and operational successes did not satisfy the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) need for a quick, decisive victory in Marjah. Due to external political pressure, ISAF required a set-piece battle to justify its shift to a counterinsurgency strategy and the surge force allocated to implement the strategy. Finally, once the Marines cleared Marjah, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) failed to provide basic services to Marjah residents, slowing MEB-A's operational momentum.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this thesis to my wife Lauren and my children, Benjamin, Miriam, and Cecilia. I would like to thank my thesis committee for their guidance, patience, and support during the composition of this thesis.

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Figure 1. Afghanistan Provincial Boundaries

Source: Edmund J. “E. J.” Degen and Mark J. Reardon, eds., *Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States Army in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2021), ii, [https://history.army.mil/html/books/059/59-1/cmhPub\\_59-1\\_volIII.pdf](https://history.army.mil/html/books/059/59-1/cmhPub_59-1_volIII.pdf).

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Operation Moshtarak (Dari for “together”), the Marine-led offensive into Marjah, Afghanistan, began on February 12, 2010, as American and Afghan forces attempted to wrest control of Marjah away from the Taliban, to alter the trajectory of America’s war in Afghanistan. This battle is important to the reader for three reasons:

1. It is the object-lesson of the American recommitment to Afghanistan
2. It represents a collision of objectives at the theater and operational levels
3. It demonstrates that the partnered Afghan government was not capable of providing order and stability following the clearing of Marjah.

The clearing of Marjah was significant because it served as a template for how American would begin prosecuting the long-neglected Afghan War in early 2010. By February 2010, the United States had shifted to a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy that dictated the clearing, holding, and rebuilding of Taliban infested areas, and then transferring security to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). While operating in Helmand Province, the Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan (MEB-A) demonstrated its ability to wage counterinsurgency warfare, providing an oversized contribution to the American war in Afghanistan during a critical juncture.

Operation Moshtarak illustrates how the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) sought to jump-start the American war effort in the Afghan War in its ninth year. However, a clear disconnect developed between ISAF’s expectations of Moshtarak’s outcomes, based on time-based conditions, and MEB-A’s evaluation of Marjah based on conditions-based outcomes.

Finally, the clearing of Marjah exposed the glaring limits of the capability of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) to govern a once-contested area following the purging of the region by coalition forces. The Afghan Government's inability to provide order and stability following the clearing of Marjah, not only slowed progress in Helmand, but forced ISAF to devote resources to Marjah longer than expected, slowing the war's operational momentum.

The existing research on Operation Moshtarak does not give a complete picture of the operational and tactical decisions made during its conception, planning, and execution. It places an emphasis on the strategic decision made in 2009 to shift America's strategy in Afghanistan to a counterinsurgency strategy. The recent publication of the US Army's official history of the American War in Afghanistan provides necessary context to the decisions made before and during Operation Moshtarak; however, the work lacks the perspective of Marines at the operational and tactical level.<sup>1</sup>

To provide additional context to the readers, the author has included research detailing the reasons behind the MAGTF's employment within Helmand and the unique command relationship that kept Marine elements under the operational control of the Marine Corps. This thesis attempts to close the gap in existing research with the inclusion of interviews completed by the Marine Corps History Division and those conducted by the author. The oral history interviews conducted by the author build upon existing work

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund J. "E. J." Degen and Mark J. Reardon, eds., *Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States Army in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2021), [https://history.army.mil/html/books/059/59-1/cmhPub\\_59-1\\_volII.pdf](https://history.army.mil/html/books/059/59-1/cmhPub_59-1_volII.pdf).

by providing additional context and documenting new information concerning Moshtarak. Most of the interviews conducted by the Marine Corps History Division concerning Moshtarak were not transcribed.

This thesis explains the importance of Operation Moshtarak by demonstrating three important points. First, the thesis documents how MEB-A generated operational tempo within Helmand Province between May 2009 and May 2010, achieving a quick operational success in pursuit of strategic ends. MEB-A began stabilizing Helmand Province in 2009 by setting conditions for the complex clearing of Marjah and demonstrating its unique capabilities as a warfighting organization. Second, this thesis analyzes ISAF's expectations for Operation Moshtarak and its attempt to generate operational momentum for the American War in Afghanistan. By retaking Marjah, MEB-A degraded the Taliban's ability to finance and facilitate the insurgency within Helmand Province and Afghanistan. However, President Barack Obama's pre-announced withdrawal timeline for surge forces placed increased political pressure on ISAF to produce tangible results in Marjah on a greatly truncated timeline, while MEB-A focused on achieving operational and tactical objectives. The disconnect between ISAF and MEB-A's measures of success in Marjah came to a head in May 2010, when the new ISAF commander, US Army General Stanley A. McChrystal, referred to Marjah as a "bleeding ulcer."<sup>2</sup> Finally, the author discusses the attempts to better connect Marjah's citizens to GIRoA following the clearing of Marjah. Unlike previous operations in

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<sup>2</sup> Dion Nissenbaum, "Afghan Town 'A Bleeding Ulcer'," *Star Tribune*, May 25, 2010, <https://www.startribune.com/afghan-town-a-bleeding-ulcer/94791794/?refresh=true>.

Afghanistan, Moshtarak readied GIROA officials to follow on the heels of coalition forces to restore GIROA's linkage with Marjah citizens.<sup>3</sup> In the days before Operation Moshtarak, General McChrystal boasted, "We've got a government in a box, ready to roll in."<sup>4</sup> The promise of the government in a box did not materialize within Marjah, slowing MEB-A's progress and dashing ISAF's hopes of a quick victory.

An examination of Operation Moshtarak offers historians and practitioners a valuable case study to evaluate the Afghanistan troop surge from 2009 to 2011 through the lens of expectation and appropriate ends. It offers lessons regarding the exceptions of commands and the obtainment of feasible ends. ISAF required a quick victory in Marjah to demonstrate the logic of its shift to counterinsurgency strategy and provide justification for the massive troop surge and withdrawal timeline approved by Obama in December 2009.<sup>5</sup> McChrystal created a set of exceptions for Moshtarak that did not mirror those of MEB-A, due to the pre-announced withdrawal timeline. The disconnect in visions resulted from political pressure placed upon ISAF and McChrystal, while MEB-A remained focused on operational and tactical level objectives. Moshtarak also sought too much, too soon from Marjah residents. The success of Moshtarak rested on Marjah resident pledging and then demonstrating their allegiance to the Afghan government, even while violence within Marjah persisted. The absence of the Afghan government and

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<sup>3</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Afghan Offensive Is New War Model," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/world/asia/13kabul.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (London, UK: Vintage, 2018), 320.

its initial feeble response within Marjah did little to inspire the confidence of its citizens. As MEB-A cleared and then held Marjah, Afghan security forces and Afghan government officials did not provide the results ISAF expected. The lack of Afghan partner development dashed ISAF's grander ambitions. Following the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan faced continued political instability, providing an opportunity for the Taliban's reemergence.

MEB-A arrived in Helmand in May 2009, following a series of events that necessitated its deployment. The following is a short section on the state of America's war in Afghanistan by 2008 to give historical context that will inform why the Marine Corps sought a more prominent role in Afghanistan beginning in 2007, the reemergence of the Taliban in southern Afghanistan, and the importance of Helmand Province.

Helmand Province is Afghanistan's largest province and home to 10% of Afghanistan's population.<sup>6</sup> American-funded irrigation projects in Helmand during the 1950s and 1960s saw the construction of two dams and three hundred miles of irrigation canals, which provided the province with ideal conditions for poppy cultivation.<sup>7</sup> Within decades external actors would once again seek to alter Afghanistan. During the 1980s as the Soviets fought in Afghanistan, Westerners viewed the conflict through the Cold War

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<sup>6</sup> Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 142.

<sup>7</sup> David Rohde, "Visit Afghanistan's 'Little America,' and See the Folly of for-Profit War," *The Atlantic*, June 2, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/06/visit-afghanistans-little-america-and-see-the-folly-of-for-profit-war/257962/>.

prism, while resident of Helmand focused on local politics.<sup>8</sup> Following the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan faced continued political instability, providing an opportunity for the Taliban's emergence during the 1990s. Helmand Province's own internal conflicts became a complex as series of "side switching, manipulation and betrayal" setting the province apart from the rest of the country.<sup>9</sup> As external groups sought control of Helmand, its residence exploited and manipulated outsiders for their own gain. The Taliban rose to power in Helmand due to its focus on social order, while leveraging its knowledge of the local political dynamics allowing them to exert social control over Helmand citizens.<sup>10</sup> Following the Taliban defeat in late 2001, western actors with little knowledge of Helmand's fragmented social and political landscape made alliances with local powerbrokers who again used external backers to advance their own personal conflicts in pursuit of local, narrow, specific aims.<sup>11</sup>

In the absence of an effective GIRoA presence and in reaction to the repeated abuses of power by provincial officials, the Taliban reemerged in Helmand Province beginning in 2004.<sup>12</sup> In southern Afghanistan as early as 2004, the Taliban began to infiltrate the area with "vanguard" teams of two or three people who secretly contacted

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<sup>8</sup> Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, 1978/2012* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014), 76.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 155-156.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey A. Dressler, *Securing Helmand: Understanding and Responding to the Enemy*, Afghanistan Report 2 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2009), 5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07926>.

local villagers and elders. As one resident described it, “They told the people that they were coming back to the district to fight against the government.”<sup>13</sup> By April 2006, British Force arrived in Helmand, just as large contingent of Taliban fighters entered the province.<sup>14</sup> The British attempted to implement a “Malayan ink-spot strategy,” focused on securing and then developing the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, with the hope that such development would spread throughout the province (Figure 2).<sup>15</sup> However, the security situation within Helmand was far worse than British planners had understood. The ink-spot strategy required the British to deploy small units to small outputs. Rather than spreading British influence like a drop of ink on a paper towel, the Taliban targeted the small outposts, in an attempt to overrun the positions.<sup>16</sup> The goal of stabilizing Helmand required securing the province, an elusive objective complicated by Britain’s reluctance to pledge additional troops without tangible evidence of tactical success.<sup>17</sup>

As the security situation in Helmand deteriorated, in October 2007 the Marine Corps began looking for an opportunity to employ the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) in Afghanistan. The Marine Corps grew dissatisfied with their mission in Iraq

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<sup>13</sup> Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, “The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004-2012,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 845.

<sup>14</sup> Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 145.

<sup>15</sup> Dressler, *Securing Helmand*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

and sought to move its forces to Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Since the initiation of America’s involvement in the Afghan War in 2001, Marine units had deployed in an episodic fashion. However, the Marine Corps was never given a contiguous battlespace to employ its preferred warfighting organization—MAGTF.<sup>19</sup> A MAGTF consists of Marine ground, aviation, and logistics elements with command elements directing the organizations. The belief was that a MAGTF would bring to bear the full force of the Marine Corps capabilities, while achieving the unity of command and effort its doctrine demanded.<sup>20</sup> The middleweight MAGTF is the Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), designed for major operations and campaigns. In 2009, the MEB construct was ideal for leading the Helmand campaign.

In March 2008, the Taliban announced Operation Ebrat (Pashto for “lesson”), resulting in a spring offensive in Helmand surrounding Afghan and coalition forces in their main centers of operation—Lashkar Gah and Gereshk.<sup>21</sup> The Taliban flocked to Helmand to exploit the province’s poppy output, which accounted for half of

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<sup>18</sup> Thom Shanker, “Marines Press to Remove Their Forces from Iraq,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/11/washington/11military.html>.

<sup>19</sup> US Marine Corps (USMC), Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-0 (w/change 1, 2, 3), *Marine Corps Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, Headquarters US Marine Corps, March 2019), 2-9, <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCDP%201-0%20w%20Ch%201-3.pdf>. There are five types of MAGTFs including Marine expeditionary forces (MEFs), Marine expeditionary forces (Forward) (MEFs [Fwd]), Marine expeditionary brigades (MEBs), Marine expeditionary units (MEUs), and special-purpose Marine air-ground task forces (SPMAGTFs).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-6.

<sup>21</sup> Dressler, *Securing Helmand*, 34.

Afghanistan's poppy production.<sup>22</sup> Marjah fell to the Taliban in September 2008 and began serving as a Taliban haven for narcotrafficking, corruption, and insurgency facilitation, while also destabilizing southern Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Marjah served as the Taliban command node within Helmand Province and provided sanctuary to foreign fighters.<sup>24</sup> The Taliban proceeded to exert administrative control of Marjah.<sup>25</sup> Unlike previous years, the 2008 Taliban offensive continued into the fall and winter, catching coalition forces off guard.<sup>26</sup> The security situation in Helmand Province threatened the entire American war effort, gaining the attention of ISAF.

In late 2008, with the Marine Corps willing to provide forces to the Afghan War, ISAF commander General David McKiernan agreed to the Marine Corps' caveats and placed the Marines in Helmand Province.<sup>27</sup> Following McKiernan's approval, the Corps dispatched 2nd MEB from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina to lead the Helmand Campaign in 2008. 2nd MEB deployed to Afghanistan in May 2009 and was renamed Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan (MEB-A). By May 2009, Marjah remained uncontested and served as a sanctuary for Taliban fighters.

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<sup>22</sup> Dressler, *Securing Helmand*, 34

<sup>23</sup> Brett Van Ness, "The Fight for Marjah: Recent Counterinsurgency Operations in Southern Afghanistan," *Small Wars Journal*, September 30, 2010, 4, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/563-vaness.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land*, 219-220.

Since 2001, American's Afghan War strategy had consisted of a mix of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and conventional operations, failing to coalesce into a cohesive strategy.<sup>28</sup> When General McChrystal took command in the summer of 2009, he shifted Afghan war strategy to counterinsurgency, but also expanded the definition of what protecting civilians meant. During the surge in Iraq and its implementation of counterinsurgency beginning in 2007, America sought to protect the population against insurgent violence. In General McChrystal's strategic assessment protecting the Afghan population against insurgent violence was not enough. McChrystal wrote, "Progress is hindered by the dual threat of a resilient insurgency and a crisis of confidence in the government and the international coalition. To win their support, we must protect the people from both of these threats."<sup>29</sup> In addition, the assessment asserted, "Protecting the population is more than preventing insurgent violence and intimidation. It also means that ISAF can no longer ignore or tacitly accept abuse of power, corruption, or marginalization."<sup>30</sup> The shift to a counterinsurgency strategy sought to achieve a reduction in violence, thus stabilizing the country, and reversing the Taliban's gains. MEB-A served as means to achieve the stated ends, but the mission hinged on the rapid development of Afghan capability. GIROA's efforts and success did not match ISAF and

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<sup>28</sup> Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 219.

<sup>29</sup> Commander, NATO International Security Force, Afghanistan U.S. Forces, Afghanistan (COMISAF), "COMISAF Initial Assessment (Unclassified) -- Searchable Document," (Department of Defense, August 30, 2009), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

MEB-A's tactical and operational success. ISAF's expanded the definition of counterinsurgency success placed MEB-A in an awkward position because the MEB's success became predicated on the rapid development of Afghan capacity, a task the Marines could do little to influence in the time provided.

This thesis consists of an introduction, three body chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter 2 discusses the arrival of MEB-A in Afghanistan and its breakneck operational pace to shape Helmand in preparation for the Afghan Presidential election in August 2009. In addition, the author examines why the Marines of MEB-A came to believe that Marjah served as the Taliban's center of gravity. Chapter 3 makes two arguments: (1) that the shift in COIN policy placed a premium on the role of the Afghan governance, which did not materialize as promised, and (2) that President Obama's withdrawal timeline created a disjuncture between the ISAF and MEB-A on whether a withdrawal would be time- or conditions-based. The shift toward counterinsurgency coupled with the withdrawal timeline necessitated implementation of a set-piece battle. Operation Moshtarak would satisfy that need.

Chapter 4 details how two Marine infantry battalions, the first of the surge force to arrive following President Obama's decision, prepared, planned, and executed the clearance of Marjah on a compressed timeline. As the Marines and their partnered Afghan National Army (ANA) forces made tactical gains within Marjah, the promise of GIRoA officials to link Marjah citizens with the Afghan government were slow to materialize. Marine battalion commanding officers stepped in to fill the void, leading programs that empowered local Marjah community leaders. The Marines' steady progress within Marjah did not satisfy General McChrystal, who judged that the clearing

of Marjah took too long. Chapter 5 serves as the conclusion of the thesis, detailing how the Marines continued to make making progress within Marjah following McChrystal's remarks, suggested a lasting implication of Moshtarak, and areas for further study.

This author's examination of Operation Moshtarak provides a much-needed context for the operational planning and execution of a Marine-led joint operation. This examination offers an important starting point for understanding the Marine campaign within Helmand Province that began in 2008. Gaining an understanding of the obstacles to, and successes of, Operation Moshtarak can illuminate the analysis of the larger Helmand campaign, including its success and persistent challenges. Many opportunities for additional analysis and research of the Marine Corps' Helmand Province campaign from 2008 to 2014 abound. This author will enhance inform and add to future study of the Helmand campaign.

## CHAPTER 2

### MARINISTAN

This chapter details how MEB-A generated operational momentum within its first months in Afghanistan. As policymakers continued assessing the Afghan War strategy, first initiated during the last months of the George Bush administration, within the first sixty days of its arrival, MEB-A began they attempt to alter the trajectory of the war in Helmand Province. However, its early success created a new set of challenges for the Marines.

During the summer of 2009, MEB-A cleared sections of Helmand, improving the security within the province. The Marines now held these cleared areas, showing show American and Afghan forces. The need to clear and then hold sections of Helmand, created an increased demand for Marines within Helmand. Based upon MEB-A's pre-deployment intelligence preparation of the battlefield, Marjah was identified as the center of gravity, providing the insurgency its strength following the Taliban takeover of Marjah in September 2008.<sup>31</sup> MEB-A prioritized the clearing of Marjah to deny the Taliban its now-established hub for drug trafficking and insurgency facilitation through Helmand.<sup>32</sup> However, MEB-A's ambitions were tempered following conversations with General McKiernan and the Regional Command-South (RC-S) commander in February 2009.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Van Ness, "The Fight for Marjah," 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Marine Corps History Division, "Interview: Brigadier General Lawrence D. Nicholson," in *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan, 2001-2009: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography* (Quantico, VA: History Division, US Marine Corps, 2014), 233.

Following General McKiernan's request for additional troops to support ISAF; however, senior military officials began questioning McKiernan's leadership. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen had lost confidence in McKiernan's abilities and relieved the general of his command in May 2009. McChrystal took command of ISAF, charting a new direction for the war in its eighth year. For MEB-A, the change of command meant that it not only had to navigate a new operational environment, but it also faced a command with new priorities.

With the Marjah operation delayed, MEB-A turned its attention to securing portions of Helmand Province in anticipation of the August 20, 2009, Afghan presidential election. On July 2, 2009, MEB-A executed Operation Strike of the Sword (*Khanjar* in Pashto)—the simultaneous incursions of three Marine infantry battalions into central and southern Helmand Province. Khanjar was the largest military operation executed since the opening days of the Afghan War in 2001, with the insertion of 4,000 Marines and 600 ANSF personnel.<sup>34</sup> Operation Strike of the Sword sought to increase the participation of Helmand residents in the election—a majority of whom were ethnic Pashtuns—thereby bolstering the legitimacy of the election. The Marines made significant gains in Helmand, relieving pressure on British forces in the province. However, MEB-A's successful clearing of Helmand's most kinetic area now required the Marines to hold those areas. As summer turned to fall in 2009, Marjah remained a haven that continued to undermine Helmand's stability.

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<sup>34</sup> Dressler, *Securing Helmand*, 38.

### Bush Administration Initiates a Review of Afghan War Policy

In October 2008, American intelligence agencies concluded that Afghanistan was in a “downward spiral,” casting doubt on the ability of the GIRoA to stem the rise of the Taliban.<sup>35</sup> President George W. Bush requested that LTG Douglas Lute, the deputy national security advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan, review the Afghan War.<sup>36</sup> Lute’s report recommended a counterinsurgency strategy with additional military and civilian augmentation. Rather than implement the recommendation prior to the inauguration of the new president, President Bush passed the findings onto the following administration.<sup>37</sup> In the interim, the Taliban returned to Afghanistan’s southernmost provinces of Kandahar and Helmand near the eastern border with Pakistan.<sup>38</sup> America’s under-resourced efforts and GIRoA’s perpetual inability to provide essential services hindered the achievement of America’s goals. These missteps allowed the Taliban to exploit the misalignment of the goals, ways, and means of adapting to the operational environment, initiate a successful insurgency, and achieve significant victories against the GIRoA.

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<sup>35</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Study Is Said to Warn of Crisis in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09afghan.html>.

<sup>36</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2010), 214.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 5.

As the 2008 US presidential election campaign continued, both candidates, Senators John McCain (Republican-AZ) and Barack Obama (Democrat-IL) supported a reevaluation of the Afghan War strategy and an increase in resources for the Afghan War effort.<sup>39</sup> The year 2008's biggest event was the collapse of several major financial institutions, leading to economic turmoil that meant that domestic political will for continued US involvement in Iraq waned. Then-Senator Obama referred to Afghanistan as the "good war" as opposed to the "bad war" in Iraq.<sup>40</sup> Following Obama's election, Vice President-elect Joseph Biden and Defense Secretary Gates traveled to Afghanistan where they met with ISAF Commander General McKiernan. During the meeting, McKiernan advocated sending an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan to prepare for the summer fighting season and Afghanistan's August 2009 presidential election.<sup>41</sup> According to Gates' memoir, Biden left the meeting feeling disturbed by the progress of the war.<sup>42</sup>

In the fall of 2008 as America focused on the presidential election and financial turmoil, Brigadier General (BGen) Lawrence Nicholson had prepared to assume the role

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<sup>39</sup> John McCain, "McCain's Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan," (Text of Prepared Remarks in Albuquerque), *The New York Times*, July 15, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-mccain.html?searchResultPosition=8>.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Landler, "The Afghan War and the Evolution of Obama," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/01/world/asia/obama-afghanistan-war.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Michael Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 337.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

of Marine Ground Combat Element (GCE) commander in Iraq. However, on December 17, 2008, his superior officer, General Dennis Hejlik, tasked him with a new mission: begin assembling the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) for deployment to Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup>

The Obama administration's first National Security Council meeting on January 23, 2009, discussed the Afghan War strategy and troop levels.<sup>44</sup> The new administration was reluctant to approve additional manning levels before reviewing the war policy. President Obama tasked CIA veteran Bruce Riedel with assessing the Afghanistan War policy.<sup>45</sup> At the February 13, 2009, National Security Council meeting chaired by President Obama, the council discussed General McKiernan's request for additional forces and debated whether to wait for Riedel to conduct his review of the Afghan War.<sup>46</sup> On February 17, President Obama informed Gates that the president would authorize 17,000 additional troops for the Afghan War effort.<sup>47</sup> In a publicly released statement, the president explained that the additional troops were "necessary to stabilize a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which has not received the strategic attention, direction, and

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<sup>43</sup> Marine Corps History Division, "Interview: Brigadier General Lawrence D. Nicholson," 230–231.

<sup>44</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 337.

<sup>45</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Press Briefing by Bruce Reidel, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and Michelle Flournoy on the New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," (Washington, DC, March 27, 2009), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/press-briefing-bruce-riedel-ambassador-richard-holbrooke-and-michelle-flournoy-new->

<sup>46</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 339.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

resources it urgently requires.”<sup>48</sup> Obama later stated, “If we [had] did not bolster[ed] security in Afghanistan rapidly, the election might not [have] come off, and, in fact, you could [have] seen a country that splintered.”<sup>49</sup> Of the 17,000 forces approved, 8,000 would form the MEB-A in Helmand Province.<sup>50</sup>

During Nicholson’s pre-deployment site survey in Afghanistan, he met with ISAF commander McKiernan in Kabul, where the city of Marjah was identified as the worst area of Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup> Marjah, located in the center of Helmand Province, had been taken over by the Taliban in September 2008 and become the nexus of criminality, corruption, and insurgency in Helmand Province.<sup>52</sup> With both commanders agreeing on conditions in Marjah, Nicholson offered, “Boss, if this is the worst place in Afghanistan, why don’t you let us go there?”<sup>53</sup>

Marine Corps commandant General James Conway offered the Marines to take on the mission in Afghanistan with one critical caveat: the Marines would deploy and

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<sup>48</sup> Helene Cooper, “Putting Stamp on Afghan War, Obama Will Send 17,000 Troops,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/18/washington/18web-troops.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Bob Woodward, *Obama’s War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 98.

<sup>50</sup> Marine Corps History Division, “Interview: Brigadier General Lawrence D. Nicholson,” 382.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>52</sup> Van Ness, “The Fight for Marjah,” 4.

<sup>53</sup> Marine Corps History Division, “Interview: Brigadier General Lawrence D. Nicholson, 233.

operate within a single area of responsibility.<sup>54</sup> The commandant's request was not without precedent, as the Marine Corps had retained operational command of their forces during Operation Desert Storm and Al Anbar Province during Operation Iraqi Freedom.<sup>55</sup> The need for control of its forces is rooted in Marine Corps doctrine, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-0, *Marine Corps Operations*, "A commander must view his area of operations as an indivisible entity."<sup>56</sup>

McKiernan accommodated the Marines' request, finding a willing partner in the British in Helmand Province.<sup>57</sup> Placing additional forces within Helmand Province later proved controversial. This decision was made by McKiernan, not the Marine Corps, based on his mission analysis. McKiernan later stated:

Now despite a lot of writings and people saying they decided where they [additional forces] would go, I can categorically tell you that I personally decided where they would go and briefed that as part of the Request for Forces process—briefed it and got concurrence from the Afghan Ministry of Defense and ultimately briefed it to President Karzai . . . it was a top-down approach of my saying I need these additional capabilities in these particular areas, south, particularly in the Helmand River Valley.<sup>58</sup>

Canada served as the lead country for Kandahar Province, and the Canadian forces in Kandahar constituted the country's largest military deployment since the Korean War.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 340.

<sup>55</sup> Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land*, 222.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 128.

<sup>58</sup> Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land*, 219-220.

<sup>59</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 62.

Kandahar Province held strategic significance for the Taliban as well, serving as its spiritual home. When the Taliban retook Kandahar, seizing the city in the summer of 2006 and rolling back coalition gains achieved during the first days of the Afghan War, Kandahar received additional US surge troops, but Helmand received priority.



Figure 2. Helmand Province

Source: MapSof.net, “Helmand Province Afghanistan,” accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.mapsof.net/afghanistan/helmand-province-afghanistan?image=full>. Modified by author.

US Forces Afghanistan Operations Order 1, issued on March 16, 2009, accepted MEB-A as a voluntary national contribution to the Afghan War effort.<sup>60</sup> MEB-A was further delegated to Regional Command-South under the command of Dutch General

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<sup>60</sup> Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land*, 220.

Martin de Kruif.<sup>61</sup> RC-South could delegate tasks and establish local control measures; however, ISAF and RC-South could not reorganize or divide MEB-A.<sup>62</sup> Only Marine Forces Central Command could issue orders to reorganize MEB-A.

The Marine Corps' unity of effort and command had aided the Marines in their success in Anbar Province, Iraq—a province once considered one of Iraq's most violent. However, senior leaders, including Secretary Gates, later questioned the rationale for dedicating a large portion of US surge forces to the Afghan War effort while stripping US Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) of their ability to organize and employ the Marines as they saw fit, namely employing a surge force in Kandahar Province. "Operational control" gives commanders the ability to organize a unit while establishing requirements for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities.<sup>63</sup> Gates later lamented that accommodating the Marines' desire to retain operational control of surge forces, trumping the needs of the Afghan mission, was his "biggest mistake in overseeing the war in Iraq and Afghanistan."<sup>64</sup> The secretary's remarks regarding allowing the Marines to retain operational control of its forces does not account for how the command relationship allowed the Corps to rapidly deploy, integrate, and then projection combat power within Helmand province at a critical juncture during the summer of 2009. The rapid deployment of MEB-A provided policymakers and senior military officials with

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land*, 220

<sup>63</sup> Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, August 2011).

<sup>64</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 340.

critical decision space during the reformulation of the Afghan war policy. Allowing the Marine Corps to retain operational control of its forces in Helmand limited the operational flexibility of ISAF, constraining the employment of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) in Helmand, meaning that, ISAF could not move the Marines from Helmand to another section of Afghanistan even if ISAF deemed it necessary. The Marines would remain in Helmand.

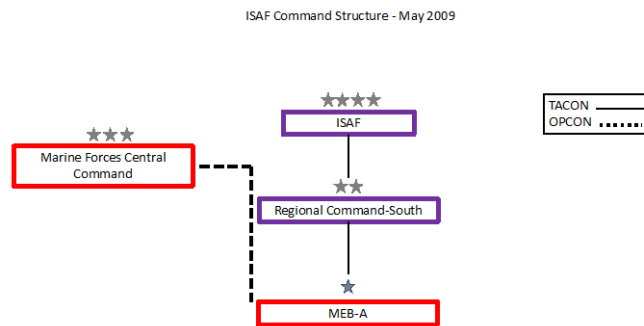


Figure 3. ISAF Command Structure, May 2009

*Source:* Created by author using information from Edmund J. “E. J.” Degen and Mark J. Reardon, eds., 2021. *Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States Army in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2021), [https://history.army.mil/html/books/059/59-1/cmhPub\\_59-1\\_volII.pdf](https://history.army.mil/html/books/059/59-1/cmhPub_59-1_volII.pdf).

Before 2009, the Corps offered episodic force packages to Afghanistan but did not deploy as a MAGTF—the Marine Corps’ preferred warfighting organization. When MEB-A arrived in May 2009, it commanded a substantial amount of combat power. MEB-A consisted of ground combat elements including the two infantry battalions (1,000

personnel each) and one light armored reconnaissance (LAR) battalion.<sup>65</sup> The three maneuver battalions received support from aviation assets including the CH-53 transport helicopters, V-22 tilt-rotor aircraft, and AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters.<sup>66</sup> In addition, 1st Combat Engineer Battalion and two artillery battalions, 5th Battalions/10th Marines (5/10) and 3rd Battalion, 11th Marines (3/11), composed MEB-A.<sup>67</sup> MEB-A did not wait to employ its considerable combat power.

### The Reidel Review

CIA veteran Bruce Riedel released his findings after Obama approved 17,000 additional forces. Riedel's Afghanistan policy review focused on Pakistan's role in the Afghan War rather than on bifurcating the two countries.<sup>68</sup> In addition, Riedel proposed a new goal for the Afghan War: "disrupt, dismantle, and eventually defeat al-Qaeda and its extremist allies, their support structure, and their safe havens in Pakistan and prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan."<sup>69</sup> Riedel offered additional options, including (1) forming a counterterrorism-focused organization within Afghanistan, (2) sending 4,000 additional troops to train ANSF, and (3) conducting a fully resourced counterinsurgency strategy that would demand up to 10,000 troops.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Malkasion, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 242.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Wesley Morgan, "Afghanistan Order of Battle 2009-2012," (Institute for the Study of War, Washington, DC, 2012), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07820>.

<sup>68</sup> Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 99.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 102–103.

Obama approved 4,000 additional forces dedicated to training ANSF, announcing his decision during a press conference on March 27, 2009.<sup>71</sup> The president pledged that an “American unit in Afghanistan will be partnered with an Afghan unit, and we will seek additional trainers from our NATO allies to ensure that every Afghan unit has a coalition partner.”<sup>72</sup> Obama remarked to his foreign policy speechwriter Ben Rhodes that he would not make another Afghan troop-level decision until after the Afghan presidential election in August 2009.<sup>73</sup> Obama approved McKiernan’s requests for forces, fearing that the deteriorating security situation would jeopardize the Afghan presidential election scheduled for August 2009.

#### The Final Days of McKiernan’s Command

Despite Obama’s approval of McKiernan’s requests for forces, questions remained regarding McKiernan’s strategy and leadership. Admiral Mullen, Gates, and General David Petraeus all suggested that McKiernan establish a three-star command between ISAF and regional commands.<sup>74</sup> However, McKiernan refused the suggestion, as he did not see the value in placing another layer between him and his tactical forces.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan,” (Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, Washington, DC, March 27, 2009), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, 114.

<sup>74</sup> Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land*, 227.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

During a meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, influential retired Army General Jack Keane proposed relieving McKiernan of command, and he had a successor in mind: McChrystal, director of the joint staff and former JSOC commander in Iraq.<sup>76</sup> Keane became an advisor to Petraeus during the surge in Iraq and noted McChrystal's performance during an extended observation.

Mullen sought McKiernan's resignation, but McKiernan refused. On May 6, 2009, Gates flew to Kabul and relieved McKiernan of command. On May 11 Gates announced McChrystal would serve as the new ISAF commander.<sup>77</sup> In a 2015 interview, McKiernan identified important lessons from his experiences in Afghanistan, including the importance of harnessing all elements of national power, the inability to address Taliban sanctuaries, the need for consistent American messaging to President Karzai, and holding the belief there was not enough time to establish Afghan institutions to build trust with Afghan citizens.<sup>78</sup>

#### McChrystal Takes Command

Upon taking command of ISAF, McChrystal commissioned his own review of the situation in Afghanistan. The new ISAF commander enlisted two officers with recent Afghan operational experience, Colonel Kevin Owens, and Colonel Chris Kolenda. McChrystal solicited input from civilian experts, including think-tank consultants such as Andrew Exum from the liberal Center for New American Strategy and Robert and

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<sup>76</sup> Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 85.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

Kimberly Kagan from the conservative American Enterprise Institute. During a month-long trip to Afghanistan, the group of external advisors assisted with drafting the policy and shaping how Washington would receive McChrystal's recommendations.<sup>79</sup>

#### Operation Panther's Claw

Nicholson's MEB-A and elements of RC-S undertook three separate operations during the summer of 2009 that boosted the flagging war effort in Helmand and set conditions for the Afghan presidential election. On June 20, 2009, Operation Panther's Claw (*Panchai Palang* in Pashto) began as a British-led joint clearing operation of an area north of Lashkar Gah.<sup>80</sup> The Taliban had long held this tract of land, which facilitated a Helmand River crossing, granting the insurgency the freedom to maneuver required to influence Helmand Province as a whole. The month-long operation showed promise to clear an area that the Taliban had controlled for an extended period and demonstrated the ability to integrate ANSF forces into an operation. However, Panther's Claw did not achieve its goals because the British-led force transitioned to the holding phase without fully clearing tracts of land. Upon the completion of a clearing operation, the joint forces in support of Panther's Claw did not possess sufficient combat power required to hold a contested area; in the end, the voter turnout for the Afghan presidential election in the area cleared during Panther's Claw was minimal.<sup>81</sup> The limited success resulted from British forces failing to conduct a methodical and complete clearing of

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<sup>79</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 60.

<sup>80</sup> Dressler, *Securing Helmand*, 34-35.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



Helmand Province with the assistance of organic MAGTF aviation and logistics assets. In the searing heat of the Afghan summer, 2nd Battalion 8th Marines (2/8) pushed into Garsher District; 1st Battalion 5th Marines (1/5) moved into Nawa-I-Barakzayi, and the 2nd LAR Battalion infiltrated Khan Neshin in the southernmost area of Helmand Province. The bold insertion of three separate battalions set conditions for the Afghan presidential election while disrupting the Taliban's lines of communication and freedom of maneuver.<sup>83</sup>

General Nicholson set the tone for Khanjar by guiding his commanders before the operation. "We're doing this very differently," Nicholson told his officer in the hours before Khanjar began.<sup>84</sup> "We're going to be with the people. We're not going to drive to work. We're going to walk to work. ...Our focus is not the Taliban," "Our focus must be on getting this government back up on its feet." In support of this vision, once the Marines arrived at their locations, they constructed outposts and patrolled their sectors. MEB-A's operations officer Colonel Eric Mellinger stated, "A key to establishing security is getting the local population to understand that we're going to be staying here to help them—that we're not driving in and driving out."<sup>85</sup> Nicholson set expectations for the mission, preaching patience to his commander, "You're going to drink lots of tea.

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<sup>83</sup> Dressler, *Securing Helmand*, 38.

<sup>84</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Marines Launch Mission in Afghanistan's South Focused on Security and Governance," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2009.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

You're going to eat lots of goat. Get to know the people. That's the reason why we're here."<sup>86</sup>

MEB-A's insertion of its forces into Taliban-controlled areas required patience and the understanding that waging counterinsurgency in long-neglected sections of Helmand demanded time and effort. The Marines remained in these districts without a capable Afghan partner to which they could transfer the cleared area. Marines demonstrated they could clear contested areas, but Afghan governance capacity was slow to materialize or never arrived, establishing a disheartening pattern in Helmand.

The insertion of three Marine infantry battalions showed how the Marines intended to use their force to clear and hold sections of Helmand, demonstrating resolve to its citizens. However, much like Operation Panther's Claw before, Strike of the Sword exposed the need for additional troops to clear and then hold contested areas. The influx of ANSF personnel offered little assistance as the performance of the inexperienced units did not meet expectations during Strike of the Sword. However, Nicholson remarked at the time that the ANSF "understand intuitively what's going on in an area that we'll just never get... They can see guys on the street, and they can tell you that this guy's not a local, that he's not even an Afghan."<sup>87</sup>

Focusing on the eastern side of Helmand and following the flow of the Helmand River gave the Afghan government a chance to govern after losing the initiative to the Taliban. General Nicholson remarked, "This is the first-time coalition forces have had a

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<sup>86</sup> Chandrasekaran, "Marines Launch Mission in Afghanistan's South Focused on Security and Governance."

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

sustained presence so far south in the Helmand River Valley. Khan Neshin had been a Taliban stronghold for several years before Afghan and coalition forces arrived and began discussions with local leaders several days ago.”<sup>88</sup> The operation served as a template for the Marjah Offensive with Marines, with ANSF conducting heliborne and surface insertions with the aid of the 82nd Airborne’s Combat Aviation Brigade.<sup>89</sup> BGen Nicholson remarked, “These efforts, combined with closely coordinated UK and Danish operations to our immediate north, will dramatically change and positively impact the security of the Afghan people living in this long-held Taliban heartland.”<sup>90</sup> Strike of the Sword began showing early signs of progress in September 2009, following the Afghan presidential election, as freedom of movement improved, and local citizens began interacting with Marines.<sup>91</sup>

### Operation Eastern Resolve II

On August 11, 2009, Marines and ANA forces initiated Operational Eastern Resolve II to liberate Now Zad, a city in northern Helmand that had long frustrated British and Marine forces before the Afghan presidential election. In October 2008, Marines from the 2nd Battalion 7th Regiment (2/7) pushed insurgences out of Now Zad

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<sup>88</sup> None, Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan, “Operation Khanjar Restores Government Control in Khan Neshin,” (Press Release, US Central Command, July 6, 2009), <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/903765/operation-khanjar-restores-government-control-in-khan-neshin/>.

<sup>89</sup> Lawrence Nicholson, “Operation Khanjar,” *Operation KHANJAR* (blog), *Small Wars Journal*, July 2, 2009, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/operation-khanjar>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Dressler, *Securing Helmand*.

but they lacked the resources and manpower required to clear and hold the area.<sup>92</sup> In April 2009, a company from 3rd Battalion 8th Marines (3/8) launched Operation Eastern Storm I to shape the battlefield and identify the enemy's disposition; however, the operation's results were unclear due to the continued inability to hold seized terrain.<sup>93</sup> Over three days from August 11 to August 13, the Marines seized half of Now Zad following intense fighting, but the advance opened just one polling station in the vicinity.<sup>94</sup> The quick succession of clearing operations during the summer of 2009 attempted to bolster the legitimacy of the Afghan presidential election by securing polling stations and demonstrated renewed American resolve within Helmand. The operations in Now Zad, Garmsar, and Khan Neshin showcased the ability of Marines to mass and clear contested areas in Helmand Province.

#### Marjah Next?

Each operation in Helmand during the summer of 2009 had limited success because MEB-A did not address the Taliban's last remaining safe haven within Helmand: Marjah. McChrystal had advocated clearing Marjah since assuming command at ISAF in 2009, not waiting for President Obama to authorize an additional troop surge. Many within the Obama administration, most notably LTG Lute, questioned the rationale for focusing on Helmand Province, which held just 4 percent of Afghanistan's population.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Dressler, *Securing Helmand*, 41.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>95</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 120.

In Lute's view, Kandahar—not Helmand—held more strategic importance. At a subsequent meeting on Afghan war policy, McChrystal defended his selection of Helmand, stating that ISAF needed to “demonstrate momentum” in the province, showing the Afghan people and the Taliban that US Marines finish what they start.<sup>96</sup> An operation the size of clearing Marjah would demonstrate America's commitment to Helmand while serving as a template for how McChrystal would employ surge forces, implementing the counterinsurgency strategy even while domestic political will for the Afghan War waned. Nicholson balanced the need to prepare for the Marjah Offensive with the imperative to maintain the initiative in other areas of Helmand. However, Nicholson went to McChrystal in the fall of 2009 seeking additional Marines for the Marjah Offensive while retaining the combat power required for securing other critical areas of Helmand and sustaining tenuous gains.

The delay in conducting the Marjah Offensive stemmed from two critical political matters. First, waging a massive offensive during the Afghan presidential election, scheduled for August 20, 2009, was politically unpalatable for President Karzai since a massive offensive in the middle of a campaign would obscure an election. In the first months of his command, McChrystal forged a relationship with Karzai. In seeking Karzai's consent, McChrystal attempted to thrust Karzai into the role of a wartime president, which Karzai had not assumed previously.

The MEB's first ninety days in Helmand showed its ability to generate operational momentum by executing a series of bold ground and heliborne insertions in

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<sup>96</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 121.

territory once controlled by the Taliban. These operations later served as a template for Operation Moshtarak in preparation for the Afghan presidential election. MEB-A and ISAF understood that the gains made by the Marines were tenuous at best and evaluated outcomes based on conditions, not time. ISAF evaluation criteria shifted to time-based conditions within the next three months, while MEB-A continued using conditions-based criteria. However, the MEB's tactical and operational successes now tethered Marine forces to newly cleared sections of Helmand. The MEB did not possess a credible or capable Afghan partner to assume responsibility for cleared areas. The slow development of Afghan security and government later plagued the grand ambitions of both ISAF and MEB-A in Marjah.

## CHAPTER 3

### SETTING THE STAGE FOR MOSHTARAK

After the Afghan presidential election in August 2009, ISAF and MEB-A turned their collective attention to clearing Marjah. However, the misalignment of resources and strategy delayed the offensive initially scheduled for November 2009 until February 2010. McChrystal needed to submit his strategic assessment to the Department of Defense. His assessment of the Afghan War recommended a shift toward waging a counterinsurgency that later drove troop-level decisions in Afghanistan. MEB-A's execution of Operation Strike of the Sword and Operation Eastern Resolve II served as a template for how McChrystal intended to use the additional forces.

MEB-A and its higher headquarters, Regional Command-South (RC-South), grappled with the potential cascading effects of the Marjah offensive. RC-South, responsible for both Kandahar and Helmand Province, agreed that allowing Marjah to remain a haven for the Taliban was untenable. However, once the MEB-A forces cleared Marjah, RC-South questioned whether its command would possess sufficient forces to fend off attacks by displaced Taliban fighters dislodged from Marjah. McChrystal and MEB-A agreed that forces necessary to clear Marjah were available, but the clearing would require the bulk of the Marine ground forces and enablers in Helmand. Drawing Marines away from districts they had begun stabilizing in the summer of 2009 jeopardized security gains made at the district level in Helmand Province. In addition, MEB-A did not have enough Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) personnel to partner with for the clearing and holding of Marjah. In addition, Afghan governance capability continued to lag in Helmand. ISAF and MEB-A's ambitious counterinsurgency

strategy relied on their Afghan partners to fill in critical gaps in social, political, tribal, and economic understanding. The clearing of Marjah had to wait until strategic, operational, and tactical conditions aligned.

After months of deliberation, President Obama announced his decision to authorize surge forces. However, the commander-in-chief affixed a predetermined withdrawal timeline that altered ISAF's measure of success for the surge. ISAF now required a quick, successful operation to demonstrate the merits of shift in strategy and justification for requesting the additional troops implementing the policy. Rather than assessing operational conditions, ISAF now judged the surge and Moshtarak on time-based conditions to show policymakers the validity of their counterinsurgency strategy. However, the pre-announced timeline did not alter MEB-A's assessment criteria, which were based on the understanding that COIN operations take time, effort, and patience. During the summer of 2009, MEB-A's initial operations yielded slow success in Helmand, but the command recognized that the gains made during COIN were fragile. The differing evaluation criteria between ISAF and MEB-A created different expectations for Helmand and Marjah following the president's announcement. The disconnect in expectations concerning Marjah were later to create tension between ISAF and MEB-A during the execution of Operation Moshtarak.

#### McChrystal's Strategic Assessment and Its Critics

As the Marines conducted operations to support the Afghan presidential election in the summer of 2009, McChrystal, ISAF commander, submitted his initial assessment

of the Afghan War to Defense Secretary Robert Gates on August 30, 2009.<sup>97</sup>

McChrystal's whirlwind travels across Afghanistan since assuming command in June 2009 had informed the assessment and relied upon the research conducted by his Strategic Advisory Group (SAG), undertaking a thorough analysis of the strategic and operational environment in Afghanistan, providing draft assessments to McChrystal, who provided feedback on the writing process.<sup>98</sup> The final draft documented how the Afghan War demanded not only additional resources but also a drastic change in strategy in 2009.

The ISAF assessment defined the stakes in Afghanistan in stark terms: "Stability in Afghanistan is an imperative; if the Afghan government falls to the Taliban—or has insufficient capability to counter transnational terrorists—Afghanistan could again become a base for terrorism, with obvious implications for regional stability."<sup>99</sup> Rather than just request additional resources for the fight, McChrystal assessed that the war effort demanded "a significant change to [American] strategy and the way that we think and operate."<sup>100</sup> ISAF now advocated a strategy "executed through an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency campaign that earns the support of the Afghan people and

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<sup>97</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2016* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2018), 365.

<sup>98</sup> Matthew C. Brand, *Resourcing General McChrystal's Counterinsurgency Campaign: The 2009 "Troop-to-Task" Planning Effort to Determine the Right Force Package Necessary to Defeat the Insurgency in Afghanistan* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Force Research Institute Papers. Air University Press, July 2013), 18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13924>.

<sup>99</sup> COMISAF, "COMISAF Initial Assessment (Unclassified)."

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*"

provides them with a secure environment.”<sup>101</sup> Absent from the assessment was a specific request for additional forces—a decision McChrystal made because he believed that including such a request would obscure his team’s analysis.<sup>102</sup>

*The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, (Field Manual 3-24), guided the shift in strategy toward counterinsurgency. General David Petraeus, who was serving as the US Central Command (CENTCOM) commander, supervised the drafting of Field Manual 3-24, drawing on his experiences in Iraq as a division commander. Categorizing the Afghan War as a counterinsurgency mission placed political concerns at the heart of ISAF’s new strategy. Field Manual 3-24 states, “Political power is the central issue in an insurgency, and each side has this as its aim. The insurgent attempts to overthrow or subvert an established government or authority; the counterinsurgent uses all of the instruments of national power to support the government in restoring and enforcing the rule of law.”<sup>103</sup> MEB-A’s initial operations during the summer of 2009 exhibited many of the tenets of Field Manual 3-24.

American officers within the ISAF, many of whom were Iraq War veterans, embraced the Field Manual 3-24 models, causing a rift within ISAF, as NATO member countries did not have a counterinsurgency doctrine.<sup>104</sup> NATO member countries continued to view the Afghanistan mission as a stability operation rather than a

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Brand, *Resourcing McChrystal’s Counterinsurgency Campaign*, 27.

<sup>103</sup> U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps, *The U.S. Army \* Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>104</sup> Brand, *Resourcing McChrystal’s Counterinsurgency Campaign*, 13.

counterinsurgency mission. American planners within ISAF began convincing their NATO counterparts that counterinsurgency in Afghanistan meant stabilizing the country and defeating insurgents.<sup>105</sup>

McChrystal's assessment proved controversial with NATO partner nations and drew the ire of the American ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry. On November 6, 2009, Eikenberry sent a cable detailing his objections to the McChrystal policy shift while raising doubt about the policy's success. Eikenberry opened his cable with a blunt assertion: "President Karzai is not an adequate strategic partner."<sup>106</sup> McChrystal's policy shift rested upon a stable governing partner in the government of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (GIROA). In Eikenberry's assessment, Karzai proved unwilling to assume responsibility for the Afghan people and its sovereignty.<sup>107</sup> Eikenberry raised concerns about the development and capabilities of the ANSF, drawing attention to the high attrition and desertion rates in the Pashtun-majority provinces of Helmand and Kandahar.<sup>108</sup> If Afghan security and governance capability did not improve, he warned, then McChrystal's strategy was doomed. However, Eikenberry did not raise objections

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<sup>105</sup> Brand, *Resourcing McChrystal's Counterinsurgency Campaign*, 13.

<sup>106</sup> US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Cable to Secretary of State, Subject: COIN Strategy: Civilian Concerns (American Embassy, Kabul, Afghanistan, November 6, 2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/documents/eikenberry-s-memos-on-the-strategy-in-afghanistan#p=1>; US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Cable to Secretary of State, Subject: Looking Beyond Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan (American Embassy, Kabul, Afghanistan, November 9, 2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/documents/eikenberry-s-memos-on-the-strategy-in-afghanistan#p=1>.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

during his testimony in front of the House Armed Services Committee on December 8, 2009, with General McChrystal sitting next to him. The ambassador stated instead, “I am confident that, as the additional US troops arrive in coming months, the situation will stabilize and turn in our favor.”<sup>109</sup>

### MEB-A and RC-South Begin Preparation

As summer turned to fall in Helmand Province, the Marines grappled with allocating their limited forces where they were most needed. Nicholson sought counsel from a trusted adviser who was not in uniform—Foreign Service Officer J. Kael Weston. This was not the first time Weston had served in a war zone. Weston had served in Fallujah, Iraq, with the Marines for two years as they retook the city from insurgents.<sup>110</sup> Weston had also distinguished himself with the Marines in Anbar Province, winning their hard-earned respect and loyalty. Nicholson requested Weston by name to serve as his political advisor, and the US State Department facilitated the general’s request.<sup>111</sup> Nicholson turned to Weston as an adviser and confidant, often having frank discussions about policy in Helmand and its implications. Nicholson and Weston agreed that

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<sup>109</sup> Karl W. Eikenberry, “Eikenberry’s House Testimony on Afghanistan,” (Transcript of Prepared Statement by U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan for Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee), *The New York Times*, December 8, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/09/world/asia/09policy.eikenberry.text.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 111.

<sup>111</sup> John Kael Weston, *The Mirror Test: America at War in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 331.

Helmand required more Marines and ANSF soldiers to secure the Central Helmand River Valley.<sup>112</sup>

Weston and Nicholson disagreed on how the Marines should allocate their forces in Helmand. MEB-A not only contended with the Taliban in Helmand but also managed a relationship with the battered British forces in Helmand. Nicholson wished to continue extending the Marines' reach within Helmand. McChrystal wanted MEB-A to seize Marjah in the fall of 2009. However, the number of Marines required for the Marjah operation would require uncovering locations in Helmand, once again providing a haven to the Taliban. The Marine operations within Nawa and Garmsar served diplomatic as well as operational objectives. Marine forces flying into Nawa and Garmsar showed that the Marines were assuming the battlespace, allowing British forces to save face following successive setbacks within Helmand.<sup>113</sup>

In October 2009, *Washington Post* reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran witnessed Weston and Nicholson debate over whether MEB-A should secure the northern Helmand city of Now Zad. The frank debate revealed how MEB-A's strategy in a particular section of Helmand served as a case study of the unique pressures the MEB-A faced in the fall of 2009.<sup>114</sup> In Nicholson's view, time was running out for his command in Helmand, and his Marines could secure district centers, giving GIRoA a much-needed victory.<sup>115</sup> Weston

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<sup>112</sup> Weston, *The Mirror Test*, 341.

<sup>113</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 111.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

objected to the general's reasoning, asking him, "Does Now Zad matter to the Afghans, or does it matter to us?" Nicholson shot back, "I've got the governor calling me twice a week. It fucking matters to him."<sup>116</sup>

The conversation Chandrasekaran documented also shows the underlying tension within Helmand in the fall of 2009: securing sections of Helmand did little to address the overall security situation until Marjah was cleared, while Afghan partners showed little competency in securing and governing the area within Helmand. However, clearing other sections of Helmand before Marjah further isolated the town from the rest of Helmand. If ISAF, MEB-A, and GIRoA sought to demonstrate their resolve, Marjah was the place to do so. McChrystal reached a conclusion similar to Nicholson's. ISAF and MEB-A could not ignore Marjah or relinquish gains made in Garmsar or Nawa but must show Afghan citizens American resolve as Afghan security forces demonstrated little aptitude.<sup>117</sup>

McChrystal pressed Nicholson to clear Marjah, but Nicholson advised against his request due to manning levels required for securing Helmand. Clearing Marjah would require moving Marines away from newly cleared areas, providing the Taliban an opportunity to reverse the gains MEB-A made in Helmand while preparing for the Afghan presidential election.<sup>118</sup> In addition, MEB-A's composition was still coming together in the fall and winter of 2009. Obtaining the right composition of forces took time. Nicholson and MEB-A's mission analysis determined that securing Helmand,

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<sup>116</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 111.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

Marjah included, required additional aviation and engineering forces.<sup>119</sup> MEB-A did not wait for the outcome of Washington’s troop surge debate and instead shaped the Joint Operation Planning and Execution System (JOPES) process, ensuring that Marine forces would arrive first into the theater following the president’s decision on troop levels.<sup>120</sup>

### The Shaping of Helmand by RC-South and MEB-A

British Major General Nick Carter assumed command of RC–South in September 2009. Both MEB–A and Nicholson reported to him. The Marjah offensive and its timing became a point of contention between Generals McChrystal, Carter, and Nicholson. McChrystal wanted the Marines to clear Marjah—scheduling the operation in November 2009—until Carter assumed command and halted the operation.<sup>121</sup> In August 2009, McChrystal pressed Nicholson to clear Marjah on the heels of the Afghan presidential election.<sup>122</sup> However, Nicholson declined McChrystal’s request, insisting that the MEB–A did not have the Marines required for the offensive.<sup>123</sup>

ISAF determined that the Central Helmand River Valley would become the focal point of its new strategy. Shaping the operational environment for the Marjah offensive became the responsibility of Marine and British forces within Helmand. Carter prioritized

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<sup>119</sup> Col Michael Killion, USMC (Retired), telephone interview by author, December 20, 2021.

<sup>120</sup> Col Michael Styskal, USMC (Retired), telephone interview by author, October 11, 2021.

<sup>121</sup> Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 300.

<sup>122</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 138.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

protecting and supporting the Afghan government while waging “a battle for people’s minds.”<sup>124</sup> He prepared for the Marjah offensive while attempting to minimize British casualties as the British public grew weary of combat losses in Helmand.<sup>125</sup> RC-South’s competing priorities stood in direct opposition to the aggressive mindset of MEB-A, whose commander had been pushing for the Marjah offensive since the unit’s pre-deployment site survey in February 2009.

### Intelligence Challenges and Integration of Special Operations Forces in Marjah

The lack of intelligence collection and analysis capabilities within Afghanistan complicated McChrystal’s shift in strategy to a population-centric counterinsurgency. Major General Michael T. Flynn, who had served with McChrystal at Joint Special Operations Command as the intelligence officer, led the effort to improve ISAF’s intelligence capabilities. In a meeting, McChrystal implored the ISAF staff, “We need to build a process from the sensor all the way to the political decision makers.”<sup>126</sup> Flynn’s assessment of ISAF’s intelligence capability was stark. Keeping with his direct manner, Flynn wrote, “Eight years into the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. intelligence community is only marginally relevant to the overall strategy. Having focused the overwhelming majority of its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, the vast

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<sup>124</sup> Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 296.

<sup>125</sup> Hartsell interview.

<sup>126</sup> Michael R. Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, January 2010), 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06183>.

intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which U.S. and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade.”<sup>127</sup> Armed with McChrystal’s intent, Flynn began procuring intelligence systems that US forces in Iraq used daily, many of which had yet to arrive in Afghanistan.<sup>128</sup>

Flynn’s report cast doubt on ISAF and MEB-A’s ability to predict Afghan citizens’ reactions following the incursion of American forces into Marjah. The limited ISAF intelligence infrastructure in Afghanistan increased coalition forces’ reliance on Afghan security forces and government officials as guides to Afghanistan’s complex social and tribal dynamics. However, Afghan security and governance capability within Helmand in 2009 was minimal. The lack of Afghan capability in Helmand made clearing areas difficult and the prospects of transferring responsibility to Afghan security forces appeared dim. The limited contribution of Afghan partners made MEB-A’s operational successes during the summer of 2009 even more impressive. Clearing Marjah in the future would require additional contributions from Afghan partners if ISAF and MEB-A were to achieve strategic victory. In an interview with the Marine Corps History Division, BGen Nicholson identified MEB-A’s lack of knowledge about the social dynamics within Marjah as a critical challenge. “I think one of the greatest challenges for us was understanding the human terrain of Marjah prior to crossing the LD [line of departure] and trying to gain some allies before we even went in there, trying to gain

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<sup>127</sup> Flynn, Pottinger, and Batchelor, *Fixing Intel*, 4.

<sup>128</sup> Coll, *Directorate S*, 369.

some cooperation, and trying to explain to a lot of the locals what we were trying to do before we went in and enlist their support, at least in supporting the government.”<sup>129</sup>

Flynn’s observations mirrored many of the MEB-A intelligence challenges. MEB-A’s constrained resources, coupled with the lack of coalition presence in Marjah, meant that MEB-A relied on outside agencies to gather credible intelligence on Marjah. Special Operations Forces, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and other federal agencies assisted MEB-A with developing an understanding of Marjah.<sup>130</sup> The DEA’s collection assets and expert capabilities identified the quantity of narcotics moving out of Marjah and the resulting money trail, which supported the Taliban insurgency.<sup>131</sup> The DEA’s work not only supported MEB-A’s thesis but also offered compelling evidence supporting that the Central Helmand River Valley was critical to the Afghan War as a whole.

#### MEB-A and Political Considerations in Helmand

MEB-A’s commander agreed with ISAF’s strategic assessment that the Taliban was waging a political offensive against the Afghan government; however, the Marines also understood that they lacked knowledge of Helmand’s intricate tribal structure. Uncontested by GIRoA, Marjah demonstrated a breakdown in security and governance. The Taliban reemerged as an insurgency group that used violence while providing the

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<sup>129</sup> Marine Corps History Division, “Interview: Brigadier General Lawrence D. Nicholson,” 235–36.

<sup>130</sup> Killion interview.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

order citizens craved, filling a void left vacant by the Afghan government. MEB-A began meeting (shuras) with tribal leaders in the Central Helmand River Valley to understand the delicate and interconnecting tribal structures.<sup>132</sup> These shuras facilitated information operations, shaping the population's view of Marines in Helmand, and preparing the battlefield for the clearance of Marjah.<sup>133</sup>

MEB-A found a willing governance partner in Helmand's provincial governor, Mohammad Gulab Mangal. In 2008, Karzai appointed Mangal as Helmand's provincial governor, and he soon won rave reviews from American diplomats for his willingness to partner with both British and US development officials.<sup>134</sup> BGen Nicholson left his first meeting with Mangal thinking that the provincial governor was the most valuable asset against the Taliban.<sup>135</sup> Early in MEB-A's deployment, Nicholson went to Governor Mangal's office, where the two laid out a map of Helmand Province. Nicholson asked Mangal where MEB-A should go.<sup>136</sup> The size of Helmand Province precluded MEB-A from deploying forces in particular areas, due to the difficulties with providing logistical support to Marines in remote sections of Helmand. A few days later, Mangal suggested where MEB-A should focus its efforts.<sup>137</sup> Mangal identified areas of concern within

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<sup>132</sup> Killion interview.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 128.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>136</sup> BGen Lawrence Nicholson, interview by Col Gary Montgomery, USMC History Division, Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan, October 27, 2009.

<sup>137</sup> Nicholson interview, 2009.

Helmand, including Khan Neshin in the very south of the province and Musa Qala in the north. Following the insertion of Marines into sections of Helmand, Nicholson instructed company commanders not to immediately go to a forward operating base but rather to patrol and operate among the people.<sup>138</sup> Nicholson also tasked each company commander to conduct shuras with local leaders in their new areas of operation within twenty-four hours of insertion to inform citizens about why the Marines had arrived and their intended mission.<sup>139</sup>

### Obama's Surge Decision

McChrystal's strategic assessment made clear to the Obama administration that ISAF would seek a significant increase in the number of troops. President Obama conducted the first in a series of meetings on the Afghan War with his National Security Council on September 30, 2009.<sup>140</sup> The advisers concluded that the Taliban's defeat was unattainable unless the United States was prepared to fight in Pakistan. The war cabinet ruled out this possibility, agreeing instead defeating the Taliban was not achievable, settling instead for degrading the group.<sup>141</sup>

On October 8, 2009, McChrystal presented three force package options to the president and the war cabinet. The first option recommended 80,000 additional troops. The second option sought 40,000 troops earmarked for the eastern and southern sections

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 370.

of Afghanistan. The final course of action sought 10,000 troops for employment in the most critical districts in Afghanistan.<sup>142</sup> During one session, CENTCOM Commander Petraeus pressed the case for more troops, insisting, “We can’t wait one day.”<sup>143</sup>

On November 29, 2009, Obama informed senior officials of his decision on the American troop level in Afghanistan. That afternoon, the president presented a six-page term sheet to Gates, Mullen, General James Cartwright, and Petraeus outlining a 30,000-troop surge in Afghanistan.<sup>144</sup> However, the surge of troops came with a caveat. Troop levels would begin to decrease in July 2011, placing an endpoint to the troop surge.<sup>145</sup> In addition, the National Security Council would lead an assessment of the Afghan security situation, the Afghan government, and the development of ANSF.<sup>146</sup> However, the term sheet did not include the word “counterinsurgency,” standing in direct contrast to McChrystal’s strategic assessment.

On December 1, 2009, President Obama announced his decision to the nation, choosing the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, as the setting.<sup>147</sup> “Additional troops that I’m announcing tonight will deploy in the first part of 2010—the fastest possible pace—so that they can target the insurgency and secure key population

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<sup>142</sup> Coll, *Directorate S*, 372.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>144</sup> Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, 325.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

<sup>147</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 129

centers.”<sup>148</sup> A segment of the surge force would focus on training “competent Afghan security forces and to partner with them so that more Afghans can get into the fight. And they will help create the conditions for the United States to transfer responsibility to the Afghans.”<sup>149</sup> McChrystal watched the announcement while on an elliptical machine in the early morning in Kabul.<sup>150</sup> Nicholson smiled upon hearing the president’s decision, which provided the MEB-A with the 2,500 Marines needed for clearing Marjah and additional forces required for securing northern Helmand.<sup>151</sup> Within two weeks, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines (1/6) and 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines (3/6) began arriving from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to Helmand Province.

After the announcement, MEB-A continued shaping Helmand for the Marjah offensive as they prepared to receive the first tranche of surge forces. MEB-A assessed the extent of the Taliban’s narcotics and insurgency ecosystem extending from Helmand to the north of Kabul. Marjah served as the hub of activity, and the various districts around Helmand served as spokes. With sufficient forces now flowing into Helmand, the MEB-A turned its attention to Now Zad, Helmand’s second-most populous city and one of the top opium-producing districts within the province. For Marjah to succeed, MEB-A had to “[take] pieces off of the table,” with Now Zad serving as one of the largest

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<sup>148</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Stanley A. McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir; Updated with a New Preface* (New York, NY: Portfolio/Penguin, 2014), 359.

<sup>151</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 128.

pieces.<sup>152</sup> Securing Now Zad further isolated Marjah from the rest of Helmand Province, denying the Taliban's ability to resupply and reinforce Marjah.

Just days after President Obama's troop-surge announcement, MEB-A initiated Operation Cobra's Anger I with the aerial insertion of a Marine infantry company from 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines (3/4 ) into Now Zad, clearing the long-festering section of northern Helmand.<sup>153</sup> Cobra's Anger I employed organic MAGTF aviation assets for the operation, serving as a template for Moshtarak.<sup>154</sup> Although farther north from Marjah, inserting Marines into Now Zad allowed MEB-A to disrupt and dislocate the Taliban out of another known haven in Helmand. Denying the Taliban another location in Helmand further isolated the Taliban from its support network.

With President Obama's decision to surge American forces into Afghanistan, the ISAF and MEB-A now received the personnel required for the complex clearing of Marjah. As the year closed, MEB-A continued to demonstrate its ability to sustain a high operational tempo in Helmand while shaping Marjah. In conjunction with ISAF and RC-South, the shaping of Marjah set conditions for the coming offensive against the Taliban stronghold in central Helmand. However, the Marines remained unsure what level of support their Afghan security and governance partners would render during and after the

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<sup>152</sup> Michael Killion, interview by LtCol Michael Moffett, USMC History Division, Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan, April 10, 2010.

<sup>153</sup> Miguel Marquez, "Marines Launch New Offensive in Afghanistan's Helmand Province," *ABC News*, December 3, 2009, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/Afghanistan/marines-launch-offensive-afghanistans-helmand-province/story?id=9245679>.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

clearing of Marjah. The president's withdrawal timeline placed additional political pressure on ISAF to produce results that would justify their change in strategy and the additional forces provided for its implementation. For MEB-A, the realities of counterinsurgency demanded something ISAF was running short of time.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MARINES TAKE MARJAH

#### Introduction

Following the president's approval of surge forces for the Afghan War in December 2009, two Marine infantry battalions were among the first units to begin deploying to Afghanistan. The first (1/6) and third (3/6) battalions of the Sixth Marine Regiment were earmarked for the Marjah Offensive. This chapter details how MEB-A integrated and employed these surge forces within Marjah. Due to the accelerated deployment timeline, 1/6 and 3/6 surmounted numerous challenges as they prepared and executed Operation Moshtarak. In the face of numerous operational obstacles, including integrating attachments and planning a joint, multinational, and interagency operation in a truncated deployment timeline, MEB-A displayed its ability to achieve operational and tactical objectives in support of larger strategic aims. Remarkable tactical proficiency was displayed as 1/6 and 3/6 seized tactical objectives, dislodging Taliban fighters. Once violence in Marjah decreased, the battalion began filling the governance and development void left in the wake of the Taliban's expulsion, as Afghan security and governance capacity did not keep pace with demand.

Unlike previous MEB-A operations in Helmand, Afghan police forces and governance officials followed the Marines into Marjah when the security situation allowed. The surge of Afghan partners following the clearing of Marjah was intended to facilitate the holding of security gains and building critical capacity for the functioning of the once Taliban-controlled city. The Marjah offensive was not only the largest military operation since the start of the Afghan War in 2001 but also served as a test bed for

America's new counterinsurgency strategy, justifying the surge forces committed by the president in December 2009.<sup>155</sup>

The success of Operation Moshtarak, and by extension the troop surge in Afghanistan, depended on the Afghan government's ability to secure and govern once-contested sections of the country. Unlike previous clearing operations in Afghanistan, Afghan government officials and police followed behind the Marines, a fact that McChrystal promoted to the American media before the operation began.<sup>156</sup> Before the operation began, a senior American official voiced a principal concern about the operation: creating "dependency."<sup>157</sup> The clearing of Marjah was the Marines' responsibility, but the Marines did not have a capable or competent partner to help shoulder the tremendous burden.

The projected rapid success of Marjah did not materialize in the eyes of ISAF. Due to external political pressure, ISAF required a quick, decisive victory in Marjah to generate operational momentum for the entire war. As spring turned to summer, ISAF continued to dedicate resources to Marjah, delaying operations in other parts of Afghanistan. RC-South and MEB-A continued to focus on the tactical conditions of Marjah, making steady yet slow progress. Various measures of success in Marjah did not indicate the "irreversible sense of momentum" that ISAF expected. At the same time Marines filled the governmental void when the GIRoA did not provide sufficient

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<sup>155</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate: The Meaning of Marjah*, S. Hrg. 111-624, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., May 6, 2010.

<sup>156</sup> Filkins, "Afghan Offensive Is New War Model."

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

support.<sup>158</sup> The ultimate prize—the citizens of Marjah—were reluctant to take sides as violence persisted into the summer of 2010. When the tactical reality of Marjah differed from ISAF’s ambitious timeline, a gulf emerged between ISAF and its subordinate commands. General McChrystal’s frustration came to a head in early May 2009, just under three months after the Marines entered Marjah when he confronted MEB-A and RC-South leadership concerning the pace and progress of Moshtarak.

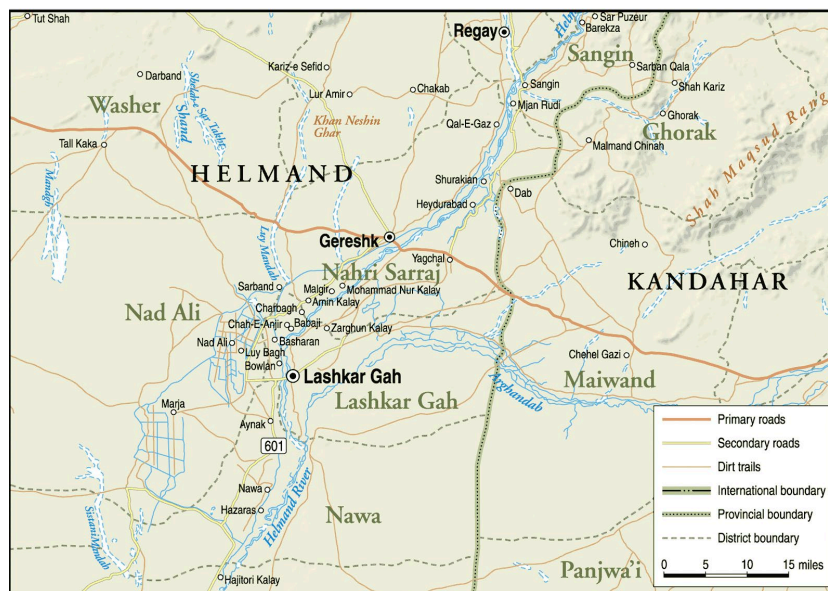


Figure 5. Central Helmand Province

Source: MapSof.net, “Central Helmand Province,” accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.mapsof.net/afghanistan/central-helmand-province?image=full>.

<sup>158</sup> Nissenbaum, “Afghan Town ‘a Bleeding Ulcer.’”

Regional Command-South's Governance Concerns  
and Role in Shaping Operations

Due to the large concentration of Taliban fighters within Helmand, Regional Command RC-South's intelligence assets assessed that there was a significant risk of displaced insurgents moving from Marjah to Northern Nad-e Ali, threatening the stability of Helmand and Kandahar provinces.<sup>159</sup> Moshtarak had a political nature shaped by the decisions of Helmand Provincial Governor Mengal and other local governmental officials in Helmand.<sup>160</sup> General Carter, RC-South's commanding general, decided that the key to Moshtarak's success lay in reestablishing governance and funding development projects, thus building a connection between Marjah citizens and GIRoA and replacing the Taliban shadow government's influence following Marjah's fall in September 2008.<sup>161</sup> Moshtarak's momentum depended upon GIRoA's ability to create a connection to Marjah citizens.

Two issues arose as RC-South placed Afghan governance at the forefront of Moshtarak. One challenge was the reluctance of GIRoA ministerial leaders to visit remote districts, such as Marjah, due to the distance to Helmand and their lack of ties to the province.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, a lack of local government officials in Helmand left RC-South without the governance capacity to stabilize Marjah following its clearance. McChrystal later lamented that his describing the cadre of administrators who would deploy to

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<sup>159</sup> Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 306.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 305-306.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

Marjah as a “government in a box,” had undermined the serious work they would undertake in there.<sup>163</sup> As RC-South and the GIRoA scrambled to find competent administrators for Marjah following its clearance, RC-South and the MEB-A began preparing Marjah for the ambitious mission, signaling to Marjah residents that coalition forces would arrive in Marjah and Nad-e Ali and remain for a long time, improving the lives of citizens.<sup>164</sup> Finally, ISAF recognized that the success of Moshtarak hinged upon the relationship it cultivated with President Karzai. General McChrystal, ISAF commander, met with President Karzai to inform him of the operation in the weeks before the operation began to inform the president of Moshtarak’s aims and gain his approval.<sup>165</sup>

Major General Carter’s concerns extended beyond the number of personnel required to secure Helmand following the clearing of Marjah, also including the risks associated with the Taliban downing an aircraft during the heliborne insertion of coalition forces into Marjah. Since Marjah had been largely uncontested by coalition forces since 2008; many intelligence gaps remained for the region. Nevertheless, while RC-South and MEB-A prepared for Operation Moshtarak, Carter received intelligence reports from his staff indicating that the Taliban in Marjah had obtained anti-aircraft artillery and intended to engage coalition aircraft. In the weeks before Operation Moshtarak, Carter tasked the

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<sup>163</sup> McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 368.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

RC-South intelligence section and SOF elements with gaining clarity on the extent of the antiaircraft threat. MEB-A developed their own plans to evaluate the risk.

In late January 2010, Colonel James “Hammer” Hartsell, MEB-A’s liaison officer to RC-South participated in RC-South directed helicopter flights over Marjah to identify potential Taliban antiaircraft artillery.<sup>166</sup> During daylight hours, Hartsell flew over Marjah in a U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopter flanked by two Apache gunships to uncover and, if required, interdict the Taliban’s suspected antiaircraft weapons.<sup>167</sup> Hartsell’s flights over Marjah did not discover any enemy antiaircraft artillery. RC-South received additional intelligence reports indicating that the Taliban lacked night vision capabilities.<sup>168</sup> Armed with these two pieces of intelligence regarding the likelihood of the antiaircraft threat and its effectiveness, Carter was willing to accept the risks associated with the heliborne insertion of coalition forces into Marjah.

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<sup>166</sup> McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 307.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

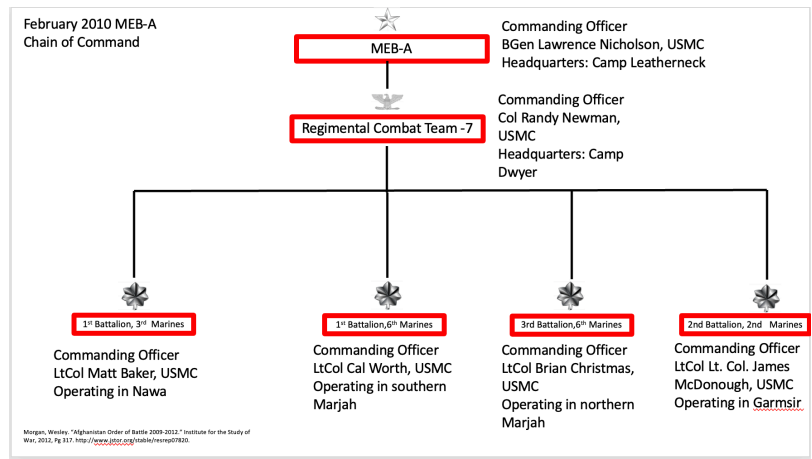


Figure 6. MEB-A Command Structure, February 2010

*Source:* Wesley Morgan, “Afghanistan Order of Battle 2009-2012,” (Institute for the Study of War, Washington, DC, 2012), 317, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07820>.

### 1st Battalion, 6th Marines Deploys

Since assuming command in January 2009, LtCol Calvin Worth and 1/6 had executed a pre-deployment training cycle designed for an anticipated deployment to Iraq. However, during a month-long training exercise during the summer of 2009 in Twentynine Palms, CA, the battalion learned they would not deploy to Iraq. As the battalion continued training without a mission, the Marines of 1/6 wondered if their unit would disband, as some Marines neared the end of their assigned service and others were due to receive orders to a new unit.

In late November 2009, 1/6 received their long-awaited deployment order to Afghanistan, Following President Obama’s decision to send surge troops to Afghanistan, 1/6 rushed from Camp Lejeune, NC to Afghanistan. In the early morning hours of December 15, 2009, Worth and the battalion’s advance party arrived at Camp Leatherneck, located in the center of Helmand Province, in the early hours of the

morning. 1/6's command team spent the rest of the day in a planning conference with staff from MEB-A. Over the next ten days, the remainder of 1/6 arrived in Afghanistan. The battalion gathered at Camp Dwyer, in the southern part of Helmand Province, collocating with their higher headquarters, Regimental Combat Team-7 (RCT-7).<sup>169</sup> Soon RCT-7 and the MEB-A designated 1/6 as the main effort for Operation Moshtarak, tasking them with securing the more populous southern portion of Marjah.

Table 1. 1/6 Deployment Timeline

Date	Event	Days Following President's Announcement
1 December 2009	President Obama announces Afghan Troop Surge at West Point	D Day
15 December 2009	LtCol Worth and command team arrive at Camp Leatherneck	D+14
Mid-January 2010	Elements of 1/6 move to Fire Base Fiddler's Green	D+45
13 February 2010	Bravo and Charlie Companies conduct heliborne insert into southern Marjah	D+74
14 February 2010	Alpha and Weapons Companies conduct ground breach into southeast Marjah	D+75

*Source:* LtCol Calvin Worth, Oral History interview by LtCol Michael I. Moffitt, Marine Corps History Division, April 26, 2010.

### 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines Deploys

In late November 2009, the 3/6's LtCol Brian Christmas instructed his executive officer, Major Bill Moore, to prepare the battalion to deploy to Afghanistan.<sup>170</sup> The 3/6

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<sup>169</sup> LtCol Calvin Worth, Oral History interview by LtCol Michael I. Moffitt, USMC History Division, Marjah, Afghanistan, April 26, 2010.

<sup>170</sup> Major Bill Moore, Oral History interview by LtCol Michael I. Moffitt, USMC History Division, Camp Lejeune, NC, August 29, 2010.

received the official request for forces on December 8, 2009. Major Moore liaised with Major Heath Henderson, the 1/6's operations officer, to gather information on the 1/6's deployment process, as the 3/6 prepared to depart from Camp Lejeune, NC. Before departing, the 3/6's leadership huddled in the secure vault at Camp Lejeune, pouring over the limited amount of classified information they had received from RCT-7 and MEB-A about their mission in Afghanistan.

3/6 arrived at Camp Dwyer, located in the southern portion of Helmand Province, on January 10, 2010. At Camp Dwyer, 1/6 and 3/6 worked out of adjacent tents; a tent in the middle of the battalion combat operations centers housed a detailed map of Marjah that was utilized by both battalions for mission planning.<sup>171</sup> The rapid deployment of the infantry battalions demonstrated the MAGTF concept's unique ability to receive, integrate, and facilitate the onward movement of infantry battalions once they arrived in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the two infantry battalions were prepared to execute a complex mission with little time to adjust to the operational environment.

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<sup>171</sup> Moore interview.

Table 2. 3/6 Deployment Timeline

Date	Event	Days Following President's Announcement
1 December 2009	President Obama announces Afghan Troop Surge at West Point	D Day
10 Jan 2010	The first elements of 3/6 arrive at Camp Dwyer	D+40
29 January 2010	3/6 establishing Combat Logistics Support Area (CLSA) to the northwest of Marjah in the Sistani desert	D+29
3 February 2010	Lima and India Companies arrive at CLSA	D+64
13 February 2010	Kilo Company conducts heliborne insert into northeast Marjah	D+74
14 February 2010	Kilo Company coordinates an airstrike on a home it was received effective fire from. Fire mission struck wrong home resulting in civilian casualties.	D+75

*Source:* Major Bill Moore, Oral History interview by LtCol Michael I. Moffett, USMC History Division, Camp Lejeune, NC, August 29, 2010.

MEB-A and ISAF made partnering with ANSF a key component of Operation Moshtarak, further adding to the complexity of the mission for 1/6 and 3/6. The battalions received not only a complex mission to clear a Taliban-infested city but, also the assignment to mentor and train an inexperienced partner force. At Dwyer, 1/6 received three Afghan National Army (ANA) companies, who had just completed their initial training in Kabul. 1/6 assigned mentoring teams, who escorted the ANA companies from their initial training base in Kabul to Helmand Province. Each of these ANA companies partnered with 1/6 infantry companies, fighting together for the entirety of the operation.

3/6, on the other hand, received and integrated the experienced soldiers of the 2nd *Kandak*, 1st Brigade, 205th Corps (2/1/201) of the ANA. The first impressions of 2/1/205 inspired little confidence due to their undisciplined appearance—a stark departure from

the Marines' high standards of martial appearance.<sup>172</sup> However, the unit proved its mettle following its deployment to Khost Province where the *kandak* had partnered with US Army units. In Marjah, 2/1/2005 showed its ability to shoot, move, and communicate, demonstrating its potential as a partnered force and gaining the respect of 3/6. The *kandak* did not come with its own logistical capabilities, relying instead on Marine Corps logistics.<sup>173</sup> The vast majority of ANA soldiers partnered with 1/6 and 3/6 were not from Helmand and many did not speak the primary language of Helmand Pashto. The ANA's lack of knowledge about Helmand and Marjah decreased their utility to the Marines.

After their brief initial planning upon arrival, elements of 1/6 had moved north from Camp Dwyer to Fire Base Fiddler's Green. Once established at Fiddler's Green, 1/6 began conducting presence patrols in the south portion of Marjah to uncover enemy defenses and gather atmospherics from the area. Two artillery batteries of 3rd Battalion, 10th Marines (3/10) occupied Fiddler's Green and focused on conducting provisional infantry tasks. From this location, the batteries provided indirect fire in support of RCT-7. The patrols around Fiddler's Green interacted with the local population wedged between Nawa and Marjah.<sup>174</sup>

Due to the truncated deployment timeline, 3/6's staff began executing the Marine Corps planning process to prepare for the Marjah offensive immediately upon their arrival at Camp Dwyer. 3/6 integrating twenty-seven different joint and interagency

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<sup>172</sup> Moore interview.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

enablers provided to the battalion.<sup>175</sup> The battalion issued mission-type orders, giving the company commanders latitude to adjust their planning according to operational need. 3/6 began echeloning forces, including its three infantry companies (India, Kilo, and Lima), from Camp Dwyer to outside Marjah and established a combat logistics support area (CLSA) eight kilometers northwest of Marjah in the Sistani Desert on January 29, 2010. Kilo Company remained at Camp Leatherneck tasked with conducting a heliborne incursion near Camp Hill on the northeast section of Marjah.

Moving the CLSA to the Sistani Desert ensured that the Marines' logistical hub remained outside of the Taliban's 107-mm mortar range. On February 3, 2010, Lima and India Companies arrived at the temporary CLSA. Now based on the outskirts of Marjah, India, and Lima Companies, along with the battalion's combined anti-armor team (CAAT) platoon, prepared for a ground infiltration into Marjah. The respective units began shaping operations in northern Marjah by patrolling to probe enemy defenses and gain atmospherics on their new area of operation.<sup>176</sup> Establishing the CLSA allowed 3/6 to integrate attached bridging assets to traverse Marjah's canal systems. These assets created lanes to enable the assault by, emplacing foot mobile assault bridges and medium girder bridges. By January 29, 2010, 3/6 solidified their scheme of maneuver; Lima Company would focus on central Marjah, India Company was to concentrate on western

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<sup>175</sup> Moore interview.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

Marjah, and the CAAT platoon would focus on the gap between India and Lima Companies.<sup>177</sup>

With limited time to prepare for the Marjah offensive, Christmas and his Afghan counterpart conducted a heliborne reconnaissance of Camp Hill in the days leading up to Moshtarak. Camp Hill was a massive bazaar serving as a Taliban command and control node. In addition to its market, it possessed a cell phone tower that, facilitated both insurgent and civilian communication.<sup>178</sup> During the reconnaissance flight, much to Christmas's surprise, he observed tens of thousands of civilians in Camp Hill's vicinity. In the months before Moshtarak, MEB-A had informed the citizens of Marjah about the operation and offered the option to remain in the city or cooperate with coalition forces.<sup>179</sup> Despite MEB-A's messaging efforts, many residents remained in Marjah, further complicating the plan for 3/6's clearing operation. Following the reconnaissance flight, and now armed with the knowledge that Marjah's citizens had not departed, 3/6's leadership stressed tactical patience to their Marines.<sup>180</sup>

MEB-A continued shaping the operational environment within Marjah, messaging their intent to clear the city to local residents to give them a chance to relocate.<sup>181</sup> The messaging, however, gave Taliban fighters the opportunity in January and early-February

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<sup>177</sup> Moore interview.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate: The Meaning of Marjah.*

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Worth interview.

2010 to construct belts of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), concentrating these devices in the south and southwest sections of the city along the main improved roads into and out of Marjah. With Marine forces positioned just south of Marjah at Fire Base Fiddler's Green, 1/6 wanted the Taliban to believe that the Marines would execute a ground penetration into Marjah, using the main line of communication known as Route 608. The belt of IEDs placed by the Taliban was intended to limit the Marines' freedom of maneuver. The Marines wanted the IEDs placed there because it would force the Taliban to expend their supply of the devices.<sup>182</sup> The Marines treated areas with a concentration of IEDs as minefields, approaching the areas with a deliberate breaching asset to identify and detonate the IEDs to facilitate Marine and ANA maneuvers.<sup>183</sup>

While 1/6 and 3/6 prepared for the Marjah offensive, MEB-A coordinated operations outside of Marjah. On February 9, 2010, Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines (1/3) conducted a heliborne incursion to seize an intersection to the east of Marjah, known as Five Points.<sup>184</sup> The intersection served as the main route from Marjah to Lashkar Gah. Later that evening, squads from Bravo Company, 1/3 arrived via foot patrol from Nawa, identifying and detonating IEDs along their path. Over the next week, elements of 1/3 established defensive positions to the northeast of Marjah, while waiting for Kilo Company, 3/6 to arrive in northeast Marjah.

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<sup>182</sup> Worth interview.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Sgt Brian Tuthill, "Marines Fight Insurgents, Secure Key Intersection on Road to Marjah," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, February 9, 2010, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/45179/marines-fight-insurgents-secure-key-intersection-road-marjah#.UAXhHaCjbQU>.

As MEB-A made final preparations for the Marjah offensive, ISAF engaged with the Afghan government to seek approval for Moshtarak. On February 12, 2010, McChrystal demanded a meeting with President Karzai and senior Afghan defense officials to gain final approval for Moshtarak.<sup>185</sup> In the weeks before the impromptu meeting, Major General Carter and Afghan General Sher Mohammad Zazai gave President Karzai a detailed explanation of Moshtarak's concept, including the rapid buildup of combat power to overwhelm the Taliban, with limited use of fire to reduce collateral damage.<sup>186</sup> Heliborne inserts of Marine companies were designed to unhinge the Taliban defenses, with the use of fires controlled by MEB-A and ISAF.<sup>187</sup> In his memoir, McChrystal recounts saying to President Karzai, "Mr. President, the forces are in position and ready to launch the operation tonight, but I won't do so without your approval." Karzai was surprised by the general's request, "General McChrystal, you'll have to forgive me. I've never been asked to approve this kind of operation before." Hours before helicopters took off for the insertion of personnel into Marjah, Karzai granted his approval.<sup>188</sup>

McChrystal's request attempted to push Karzai toward becoming a wartime leader, recognizing that Karzai's consent and GIROA's engagement were critical to Operation Moshtarak's success. The ISAF commander judged it necessary for Karzai and

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<sup>185</sup> McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 362.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

GIRoA to assume responsibility for the operation and its associated risks because Moshtarak's success, unlike that of previous operations, depended upon the engagement of GIRoA and ANSF. ISAF and MEB-A's ambitions for Moshtarak hinged on the engagement of willing and capable partners. In the coming months, GIRoA's promised engagement in Marjah faded, leaving the Marines to fill the void created by a government that lacked both the will and capability to govern Marjah following its clearing.

Establishing a cadre of Afghan civilian governmental officials tasked with stabilizing Marjah following its clearance took months.<sup>189</sup> Many talented Afghan technocrats preferred the relative tranquility of Kabul to the unstable and remote districts of rural Afghanistan.<sup>190</sup> Unlike other homogenous districts within Helmand Province, Marjah was settled by forty different tribes.<sup>191</sup> Building a consensus proved difficult and was further complicated by tribal power brokers who benefitted from Marjah's opium trade. Clearing Marjah compromised its citizens' livelihoods, as the GIRoA, absent since September 2008, threatened to upend existing power structures within the city. Marine battalions faced a cunning foe in the Taliban, and they also negotiated a complex tribal structure with limited support from GIRoA officials, all of whom were also outsiders.

As ISAF sought and gained approval for Moshtarak, MEB-A designated 1/6 as the main effort. Due to the complexity of the operation, MEB-A coordinated external units to assist 1/6 and 3/6. The 3rd *Kandak*, 4th Brigade, 205th Corps, advised by a US

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<sup>189</sup> McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 368.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> Nicholson interview, 2009.

Army Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha, inserted into the southwest of Marjah, hours before 1/6 inserted their first companies.<sup>192</sup> The 4th LAR screened to the west of Marjah in the Sistani Desert. 1/6's objectives within Marjah focused on the population centers, which also served as the Taliban command and control nodes. The primary objective for 1/6 was the Marjah District Center. Every Thursday the district center hosted thousands of Marjah residents. The Loy Charah bazaar to the east of the district center, served as another objective for 1/6. The bazaar was not only a meeting point and market for Marjah citizens but also the Taliban's Marjah headquarters. From Loy Charah, the Taliban administered justice and governed the city. Narcotraffickers liaised with the Taliban at the Loy Charah bazaar, as it was their main market for selling and transporting copious quantities of illicit drugs. Four miles northwest of the district center, MEB-A identified Koru Chareh bazaar as another objective due to its proximity to the population and its facilitation of trade within Marjah. 1/6 planned to insert a company at both the Koru Chareh and Loy Charah bazaars under the cover of darkness, surprising the Taliban and bypassing the prepared IED belts.<sup>193</sup> 1/6 assigned Bravo Company responsibility for Koru Chareh bazaar, while Charlie Company was responsible for the Loy Charah bazaar.

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<sup>192</sup> Thomas Harding, "Operation Moshtarak: First Wave of Offensive against Taliban Strongholds Begins," *The Telegraph*, February 13, 2010, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/onthefrontline/7225819/Operation-Moshtarak-first-wave-of-offensive-against-Taliban-strongholds-begins.html>.

<sup>193</sup> Worth interview.



Figure 7. 1/6 and 3/6 in Marjah

*Source:* MapSof.net, “Central Helmand Province,” accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.mapsof.net/afghanistan/central-helmand-province?image=full>. Author modification.

### The Marines Enter Marjah

In the early hours of the morning on February 13, 2010, MEB-A’s months of preparation for the clearing of Marjah were set in motion as the first Marine units arrived in the city. Within two hours, 600 personnel from 1/6’s Bravo and Charlie Companies, with their Afghan partners, inserted into Marjah via helicopters. The Marines’ ability to amass combat power within a short time caught the Taliban off guard. 1/6 judged that

they had a 30- to 60-minute window for incursion.<sup>194</sup> Bravo and Charlie companies consolidated their positions, with little illumination offered by the moon as temperatures plunged to 30 degrees Fahrenheit. Due to the IED threat, both companies prepared to operate without resupply or reinforcement for forty-eight to seventy-two hours. The companies waited until daybreak to begin movements from their assembly areas. At first light, Bravo and Charlie Companies received their first contact.

With Bravo and Charlie Companies inserted into the city, 1/6's Weapons Company and the engineer section prepared for the ground penetration into southern Marjah. 1/6 formed a task force breaching, with Weapons Company providing support from fire positions and Charlie Company acting as the assault force to exploit the breach and cross over the bridges. In preparation, on February 12, 2010, engineer platoon commander First Lieutenant Steven Bancroft and his Marines began constructing a road just outside the southeastern corner of Marjah, providing an assembly area for the ground penetration force.<sup>195</sup> On February 14, 2010, 1/6 tasked Bancroft and his marines with breaching IEDs, and establishing lanes and bridges across the Wakil Wazir crossing into Marjah at the city's southeastern corner.<sup>196</sup> Bancroft's engineer section was augmented by a section of Marine Assault Breaching Vehicles (ABVs), a section of armored vehicle launched bridge (AVLB), mine line charges (MICLICs), and a section of US Army Rapidly Emplaced Bridge Systems (REBS) to execute the complex breaching

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<sup>194</sup> Worth interview.

<sup>195</sup> Steve Bancroft, interview by author, Fort Leavenworth, KS, February 22, 2022.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

operation.<sup>197</sup> (Bancroft's engineer squads were attached to the 1/6 infantry line companies.) First, the engineers cleared a two-kilometer IED belt, employing technical and explosive means up to the canal. Next, the engineers emplaced bridging equipment across the canal. Upon crossing the canal, engineers fired MICLICS, detonating emplaced IEDs. Finally, the engineer section proofed lanes with the ABVs for the follow-on movement of the penetration force. In total, the Marines identified and detonated 24 during the breach and ground penetration. The threat of IEDs continued as the ground penetration force advanced to the center of the city at the Loy Charah bazaar.

The insurgency's use of IEDs within Marjah during the opening days of Moshtarak would continue throughout the 1/6 and 3/6's deployment to Marjah, taxing their limited engineering and route clearance assets. IED production grew in its complexity, sophistication, and lethality as the Taliban adapted to the Marines' tactics.<sup>198</sup> The limited engineering assets could not keep pace with the insurgencies' rapid emplacement of IEDs, as they often followed the Marines' methodical lane clearing and proofing to emplace new IEDs.<sup>199</sup>

During February 13, 2010, 1/6's Alpha and Bravo Companies fought 60 to 70 enemy personnel following their incursion in Marjah, confirming MEB-A's assessment that Marjah was critical to the Taliban and the Marines would face stiff resistance. Taliban elements maneuvered against the companies, delaying Alpha and Bravo's

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<sup>197</sup> Bancroft interview.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

advance from their initial incursion points to their objectives. Due to Marjah's deep canal system, both companies executed deliberate crossings of the canals, slowing the companies' advance. The presence of the civilian population within Marjah limited the employment of indirect fire and combined arms. The Marines relied upon their direct fire weapons to enable maneuver, while minimizing collateral damage.<sup>200</sup>

Bravo Company, under the command of Captain Ryan Sparks, faced a determined and competent enemy force, complete with well-trained snipers, who inflicted casualties on Bravo Company and prohibited their maneuver to their objective. 1/6 later discovered shell casings from 7.62 armor-piercing ammunition in their Area of Operation (AO).<sup>201</sup> Due to Marjah's flat topography and low-lying buildings, Bravo Company was unable to identify and maneuver to an advantageous position. Sparks managed to lead an ambush against an enemy force as it displaced, killing ten insurgents and a sniper. Over the next several days, the company encountered stiff resistance but managed to expand its foothold.<sup>202</sup>

By February 15, 2010, Charlie Company had moved overland to reinforce Bravo Company, relieving pressure on Sparks's Marines. By February 20, 2010, the security environment within southern Marjah permitted the arrival of General Nicholson.<sup>203</sup> In

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<sup>200</sup> Capt Ryan Sparks, interview by LtCol Michael I. Moffett, Camp Lejeune, NC, October 17, 2010.

<sup>201</sup> Worth interview.

<sup>202</sup> Hall of Valor: The Military Medals Database, "Timothy Sparks," The Hall of Valor Project, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/204778>.

<sup>203</sup> Worth interview.

addition, Worth requested Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) forces for southern Marjah and by February 28, 2010, ANCOP began assuming positions within the south of the city.<sup>204</sup> On February 23, 2010, 1/6 began clearing from the inside of southern Marjah outward, securing critical crossing points to facilitate Marine and civilian movement.<sup>205</sup> At the end of February, most direct engagements ceased, as 1/6 pushed Taliban fighters to southern Marjah's periphery.

### 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines Fight in Northern Marjah

At 2:45 on the morning of February 13, 2010, Kilo Company and their Afghan partner force inserted into northeast Marjah, courtesy of the 82nd Airborne Combat Aviation Brigade.<sup>206</sup> Kilo Company packed its bags with three days of sustenance because the company would operate without resupply or reinforcements during the initial stage of the operation as the rest of the battalion conducted their ground incursion from the northwest of Marjah.<sup>207</sup> With Kilo Company focused on Camp Hill, Lima Company focused on the central northern part of Marjah. 1/6 assigned India Company the western section of northern Marjah. The ground incursion, like 1/6's to the south, faced prepared defensive fighting positions and belts of IEDs, restricting 3/6's freedom of maneuver and mobility. Moreover, again like 1/6 to the south, the incursion of Kilo Company caught

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<sup>204</sup> Worth interview.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Moore interview.

<sup>207</sup> Joshua Biggers, interview by LtCol Michael I. Moffett, Camp Lejeune, NC, August 31, 2010.

the Taliban off guard. Kilo Company later discovered prepared defensive fighting positions oriented to the east of Camp Hill.<sup>208</sup> By 0730 that morning, Kilo Company had received the first shots, followed by sporadic fire throughout the day.<sup>209</sup>

Kilo Company's actions on the morning of February 14, 2010, demonstrated tactical acumen, while reminding the unit of the chaotic nature of conflict. The enemy reorganized and decisively engaged Kilo Company throughout the day, but a critical targeting error placed Kilo Company in an even more precarious position. The company observed intense, well-aimed small-arms fire from one mud-walled compound. The company coordinated with higher headquarters for a high mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS) strike on the opponent. However, the rocket strike hit the wrong compound due to a communications error, resulting in the death of at least ten Afghan citizens, including five children.<sup>210</sup> "The compound that was hit was not the one we were targeting," said Captain Joshua Biggers, Kilo Company's commander.<sup>211</sup> McChrystal apologized to Karzai for the civilian casualties, which marred Operation Moshtarak on just its second day.<sup>212</sup> The well-trained, disciplined Marines of Kilo Company executed their role, but the fog and friction of war clouded the battlefield, resulting in the death of

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<sup>208</sup> Biggers interview,

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> C. J. Chivers and Rod Nordland, "Errant U.S. Rocket Strike Kills Civilians in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/15/world/asia/15afghan.html>.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

civilians nonetheless. Kilo Company continued fighting until it secured its objective on February 17, 2010.<sup>213</sup> By February 28, 2010, the company moved to Five Points, where they remained for the duration of their deployment. While at Five Points, the company secured Route 608, connecting Marjah with the provincial capital of Lashkar Gar.

### 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines Consolidates Back into Marjah

3/6's intelligence officer's assessment before the battalion's incursion into Marjah proved prescient. The battalion assessed that the Taliban would fight the battalion for four days following the incursion. Then, the insurgency would bleed back into the populace, preferring to wage a traditional counterinsurgency against a foe with superior weaponry. Following their clearance of Camp Hill, Kilo Company continued clearing the eastern section of Marjah, while Lima Company cleared the middle section of northern Marjah, and India Company cleared the western sections. Each company executed a deliberate clear of their sectors and then received an expanded mission. Lima Company moved further to the northeast into an area known as Kariz Sadi, while Kilo Company maneuvered 15 kilometers east, securing Route 608 to the Five Points area. Keeping Route 608 open was critical as it allowed for Marjah residents access to Lashkar Gar and enhanced their perception of security. In a Marine Corps History Division interview, Major Moore stated that if 3/6 left a section of Route 608 uncovered, the Taliban would place an IED.<sup>214</sup> India Company maneuvered west to the Sistani Peninsula, where the company meet little resistance.

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<sup>213</sup> Biggers interview.

<sup>214</sup> Moore interview.

By early March 3/6 was still experiencing a high number of engagements within northern Marjah. Christmas met with Colonel Randy Newman, RCT-7's commanding officer, and presented courses of action to enhance security within northern Marjah. With little kinetic activity within the Sistani Desert, Christmas proposed repositioning India Company to the Sistani Gap in the northwest portion of Marjah, while maintaining a civil affairs presence in Sistani. The number of engagements drove the decision to reposition India Company within northern Marjah but also the coming poppy harvest in March and April. While Marjah's locals focused on the poppy harvest, engagement fell within 3/6's area of operation. However, 3/6 assessed that the decrease in engagements would be short-lived. The fighting season was to begin in May, bringing with it an influx of foreign fighters, meaning that securing northern Marjah would become more difficult. When violence in Sistani flared up again in May, Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines attached to 3/6 to quell the violence and sustain success in northern Marjah.

3/6 found Marjah citizens who were willing to partner with the battalion, particularly to establish schools in northern Marjah. For example, a 3/6 established a school next to Kim's bazaar, equipped with supplies acquired from the local market. On the first day of school, no student attended. LtCol Christmas engaged with local residents and encouraged school attendance. The next day, the school had fifty-two students present, and the following day, there were sixty. A similar pattern occurred in Sistani, where the 3/6 Marines established a school that was well-attended by both male and female students.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Moore interview.

As kinetic activity within Marjah decreased following the Marines insertion in mid-February, the success of Moshtarak hinged on the promised “government in a box.” GIRoA failed to link Marjah’s citizens to the central government, thus hindering the Marines’ efforts. Before Operation Moshtarak, the British-led provincial reconstruction team in Lashkar Gah had identified seven elders, who were born in Marjah, to help liaise between Marjah residents and the Marines.<sup>216</sup> The elders staged outside the city as the clearance started, but when the time came for the elders to move into the city, each declined to fulfill his role. An official from Karzai’s government—Haji Zahir, a figure with a disreputable past—assumed the role of district governor.<sup>217</sup> Zahir had served time in a German jail following his conviction for stabbing his stepson. While in Marjah, Zahir became the representative of the Afghanistan government but did not possess a budget or receive support from GIRoA ministries in Kabul.<sup>218</sup> Despite Zahir’s checkered past, Marjah residents applauded his efforts when President Karzai visited Marjah.<sup>219</sup>

Poppies, not governance, were on the minds of Marjah’s citizens in March 2010. Marjah farmers planted poppies in the autumn and harvested the crop the following autumn. Governor Mangal believed that poppy eradication should occur where security was permissible.<sup>220</sup> However, Nicholson and Col Newman disagreed with Mangal’s

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<sup>216</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 142.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>220</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 252.

assessment, fearing that eradication would turn subsistence farmers toward the insurgency.<sup>221</sup> MEB-A delayed widespread eradication until the next harvest. GIRoA instituted a program offering farmers seeds for summer and cash payments in exchange for destroying their poppy harvest.<sup>222</sup> However, GIRoA's conflicting message on poppy eradication further complicated the Marines' efforts to provide security and stability in Marjah during the spring and early summer of 2010. The 2010 opium yield decreased because of an insect infestation, decreasing the quality and quantity of the opium paste. In previous years, 40,000 Afghans traveled to Marjah to support the harvest, but in the spring of 2010, that number fell to an estimated 10,000.<sup>223</sup>

#### The Marjah Accelerated Agricultural Transition and Marjah Governance Challenges

With GIRoA providing feeble support to Marjah, in April 2010, the Marines implemented the Marjah Accelerated Agricultural Transition (MAAT) program to incentivize farmers to grow legal crops.<sup>224</sup> The program offered farmers \$300 per acre to grow legal crops, such as wheat, rather than poppies.<sup>225</sup> In addition, farmers who agreed

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<sup>221</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 252.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Worth interview.

<sup>224</sup> LCpl James W. Clark, "Sowing Seeds of Support; Marines Facilitate Crop Change through Agriculture Transition Pro," I Marine Expeditionary Force, United States Marine Corps, April 20, 2010, <https://www.imef.marines.mil/Media/News/News-Article-Display/Article/534706/sowing-seeds-of-support-marines-facilitate-crop-change-through-agriculture-tran/>.

<sup>225</sup> Moore interview.

to cease poppy production received access to fertilizer and tools.<sup>226</sup> Furthermore, Governor Mengal offered seed and fertilizer as part of the Helmand Food Zone Program.<sup>227</sup> “The verification process is starting to speed up,” said Major David Fennell, a Marine civil affairs team leader attached to 1/6. “But you run into the realities on the ground, like the scope of the operation and the amount of footwork it takes.”

Moreover, connecting GIRoA with northern Marjah’ citizens proved difficult. Despite being appointed as the district governor of Marjah, Zahir, along with many others in the city, understood Marjah’s boundaries.<sup>228</sup> In one incident, residents on Marjah’s periphery wished to participate in the MAAT, but they were turned away because their identification cards indicated that they were not Marjah residents.<sup>229</sup> 3/6 built Haji Zahir an office in northern Marjah, where the district chief held office hours with local citizens. Eventually, 3/6 grew impatient with Zahir due to his indecisive nature, but no other GIRoA official partnered with Christmas and 3/6.<sup>230</sup> The “government in a box” never

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<sup>226</sup> LCpl James Clark, “Farmers Transition to Different Crops: Marines, Afghan Forces Provide Aid,” I Marine Expeditionary Force, United States Marine Corps, April 26, 2010, <https://archive.ph/20130710224519/http://www.imef.marines.mil/News/NewsArticleDisplay/tabid/3963/Article/47727/farmers-transition-to-different-crops-marines-afghan-forces-provide-aid.aspx#selection-2749.0-2749.182>.

<sup>227</sup> Moore interview.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

materialized in northern Marjah, so Christmas attempted to fill the void as best he could.<sup>231</sup>

### 1/6's View of Marjah

In April 2010, during an interview with the Marine Corps History Division, Worth did not view his battalion's end state as time-based, but rather as conditions based. The battalion emphasized four separate yet complementary lines of operation. Security was the primary line of operation, with the Marines and ANSF providing security to a once-lawless Marjah. However, in Worth's eyes, the true measure of success in Marjah was when residents took an active role in their own security.<sup>232</sup> During the interview, LtCol Worth reported that tribal leaders in southern Marjah had begun to repel Taliban advances into their compounds and sought the GIRoA's assistance to secure their tribe and interests.<sup>233</sup> Another focus of effort was developing ANSF to provide policing within Marjah, which would prove critical to the long-term success of the mission. The Marines sought to ensure that ANSF personnel did not engage in graft and corruption unlike the Afghan National Police who had previously served in the city. 1/6 focused on bolstering their ANSF partners' logistic capability to prevent Afghan forces from preying on the citizens, but systemic ANSF logistical challenges remained. Worth focused on governance within Marjah as well, building a relationship with Zahir, in a bid to advance development, security, and governance.

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<sup>231</sup> Moore interview.

<sup>232</sup> Worth interview.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

A critical test of governance and security within Marjah was the status of Route 608, the main route connecting Marjah to Helmand's provincial capital Lashkar Gar. Route 608 remained open, connecting the two major population centers. The route facilitated trade and supported the Marines' assertion that security within Marjah improved. However, questions of security remained for Marjah residents and extended beyond securing routes. Many of Marjah's subsistence farmers queried whether the GIRoA could secure their land rights for the future, not just during the 2010 harvest. Worth's biggest concern remained the GIRoA's ability to govern without Marines' support and trying to build a relationship between the central government and Marjah's skeptical citizens.<sup>234</sup>

For all of the actions undertaken by the Marines in Marjah, GIRoA, and ANSF, a field researcher revealed that Moshtarak did not achieve its intended results with the citizens of Marjah. Specifically, an April 2010 report, produced by the International Council on Security and Development, found that 61 percent of respondents felt more negatively about coalition forces than before Operation Moshtarak began.<sup>235</sup> In addition, 78 percent of the respondents were often or always angry, and 45 percent stated that they were angry at the coalition forces' actions.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Worth interview.

<sup>235</sup> Norine MacDonald, "ICOS: Operation Moshtarak Lessons Learned," (International Council on Security and Development, Brussels, Belgium, April 1, 2010), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/moshtarak2.pdf>.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

Persistent violence within Marjah following the poppy harvest season was due in part to the classic counterinsurgency problem: distinguishing a villager from an insurgent.<sup>237</sup> ANSF within Marjah were composed of a mix of Tajiks, eastern Pashtuns, and Hazaras, who were treated as outsiders by Marjah's citizens.<sup>238</sup> Nicholson attempted to raise a police force consisting of Marjah residents, but the Taliban intimidated potential recruits and their families.<sup>239</sup> Police forces arrived from other parts of Afghanistan and were again treated as outsiders by Marjah's citizens.

With GIRoA slow to provide governance and ANSF unable to distinguish between friend and foe within Marjah, Christmas and Worth began partnering with local Marjah citizens to understand Marjah's human terrain. Drawing on his experiences in Afghanistan's Uruzgan Province and Iraq, Christmas sought out Marjah citizens when establishing local community watches.<sup>240</sup> During the MEB-A's initial briefings with commanders, Nicholson encouraged experimentation and initiative when waging counterinsurgency.<sup>241</sup> The two battalion commanders executed the MEB-A's intentions and granted the autonomy to execute the program. Nicholson not only permitted the

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<sup>237</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 254.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Nicholson interview, 2009.

militia program but encouraged its implementation, while McChrystal and Karzai had not yet approved the initiatives.<sup>242</sup>

As 1/6 and 3/6 found innovative means to secure Marjah, the operation drew scrutiny from ISAF. In April 2010, Marjah's poppy harvest ended and fighting season began, jeopardizing the security gains the Marines had made during the first three months of Operation Moshtarak. Throughout May 2010, 1/6, faced an average of twelve attacks per day.<sup>243</sup> The Marines took measures to ensure the district's security, including banning motorcycles and blowing up footbridges to restrict the movement of the Taliban into the district.<sup>244</sup> Nicholson understood that the regression in Marjah obscured the dramatic progress Moshtarak achieved. During a 2010 interview, Nicholson said "This [Marjah] was an area that we could not go into—unlike any other areas in Helmand [Province], this was an area that we could not get into. This was an area where the enemy was in great numbers and in great strength."<sup>245</sup>

The promise of a quick victory in Marjah faded and the prospect of Moshtarak serving as a model operation for ISAF now dimmed. General McChrystal was frustrated with Moshtarak's perceived slow progress as demonstrated during a briefing with 1/6 in May 2010. McChrystal's patience had run out with the Marines and Operation Moshtarak. "You've got to be patient," LtCol Christmas told the general. "We've only

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<sup>242</sup> Nicholson interview, 2009, 255.

<sup>243</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 253.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> Nicholson interview, 2009.

been here for 90 days.” “How many days do you think we have before we run out of support from the international community?” McChrystal retorted. “I can’t tell you, sir,” Christmas responded. “I’m telling you,” McChrystal snapped. “We don’t have as many days as we’d like.”<sup>246</sup> McChrystal’s frustration spilled over into his meeting with Major General Carter later that day, and he chastised the British commander for not sending additional British troops to Marjah. McChrystal asserted that Marjah was a “bleeding ulcer.”<sup>247</sup>

McChrystal’s remarks about Marjah gained the attention of the American media as policymakers began questioning Operation Moshtarak’s success, three months after the Marines arrived in Marjah.<sup>248</sup> By May 2010, the slow progress made by GIRoA within Marjah had hamstrung the Marines’ efforts as they tried to secure Marjah following the poppy harvest season and at the start of the fighting season. The MAGTF displayed remarkable flexibility, as their infantry battalion—supported by the entire MAGTF—shifted from the initial phase of clearing Marjah to reconstructing the once-Taliban sanctuary. This mission included clearing Marjah, while also advising an Afghan partner force, then pivoting back to offensive operations against a determined enemy during the traditional fighting season in April 2010. The lofty ambitions of Operation Moshtarak never emerged Moshtarak consumed ISAF personnel and equipment, while the war continued throughout Afghanistan, tethering ISAF to Marjah for far longer than

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<sup>246</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 145.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate: The Meaning of Marjah.*

they had anticipated. Marjah became a “bleeding ulcer” due to the lack of Afghan governance and security capacity and capability. Marine leadership and innovation in the middle of a combat zone achieved limited aims, as they struggled to secure Marjah and seek the allegiance of Marjah citizens while the Taliban continued operating within the city. Nevertheless, for all the challenges and constraints MEB-A faced between February and May 2010, the MAGTF completed its critical task: slowing the Taliban’s momentum within Helmand Province.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The ambition of Operation Moshtarak and its strategic objective makes the Marjah offensive one of the most significant Marine Corps battles during the twenty-year war in Afghanistan. The planning and execution of Moshtarak demonstrated the Marine AirGround Task Force's (MAFTG) ability to deploy, integrate, and task organize in a limited time to project combat power in pursuit of a strategic objective. The Marine infantry battalions who seized Marjah arrived within two months of the commencement of the operation. Elements of MEB-A and their enablers not only cleared a Taliban controlled city but did so while mentoring an Afghan partner force. Following the clearing of Marjah, the Marines began facilitating the governance and stability of a previously ungoverned city. In the face of numerous challenges, the operational flexibility displayed by MEB-A offers students of warfare valuable lessons while providing opportunities for further inquiry.

In the spring and summer of 2009, as policymakers debated the direction of the Afghan War, MEB-A demonstrated its ability to generate operational tempo in support of strategic aims. Within the first ninety days in Helmand Province, MEB-A planned, executed, and led Operation Strike of the Sword and Operation Eastern Resolve II. These operations stabilized Helmand Province, demonstrated American resolve within the province, and enabled the Afghan 2009 Afghan Presidential election. After early successes in Helmand, MEB-A continued shaping Helmand for the Marjah offensive. Once surge forces began arriving, MEB-A integrated Marines, joint, multination, and interagency enablers for the execution of Moshtarak. MEB-A then led the successful

clearing of Marjah, degrading the Taliban's ability to wage an insurgency in Helmand, while overcoming significant tactical and operation-level challenges.

MEB-A's tactical and operational level successes did satisfy ISAF's need for a quick decisive victory. ISAF viewed Moshtarak as an opportunity to validate its counterinsurgency strategy, now resourced with the personnel required to implement its plan. With a pre-announced withdrawal timeline for surge, ISAF altered its evaluation criteria from conditions-based to time-based. The perceived delays in Moshtarak's progress called into question ISAF's ambitious strategy and ample resources. The disconnect between ISAF and MEB-A's expectations offer a cautionary case study for the military professional on the importance of aligning ends, ways, expectations, and means.

General Stanley McChrystal terming Marjah as a "bleeding ulcer" surprised the Marines fighting in Marjah. However, McChrystal's propensity to speak his mind soon overshadowed his remarks concerning Marjah. Following the publication of a June 2010 *Rolling Stone* profile in which the general and his senior staff mocked senior government officials, including then-Vice President Joseph Biden, President Obama accepted McChrystal's resignation of command.<sup>249</sup> General Petraeus, CENTCOM Commander, replaced McChrystal as the commander of ISAF.

McChrystal's remarks obscured the gains made within Marjah while exposing the disconnection between ISAF and MEB-A's expectations for Marjah. McChrystal's

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<sup>249</sup> Helene Cooper and David E. Sanger, "Obama Says Afghan Policy Won't Change after Dismissal," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/24/us/politics/24mcchrystal.html>.

dismissal as ISAF commander threw the Afghan War into flux once again during the summer of 2010. In his memoir, General McChrystal remarked that he had sought to temper the expectations of American and European policymakers before Moshtarak.<sup>250</sup> However, McChrystal and ISAF communicated a different set of expectations to the MEB-A when he confronted LtCol Christmas in May 2010 during the general's visit to Marjah. Before General McChrystal visited Marjah in May 2010, Regional Command-Southwest (RC-SW) Commander Major General Richard Mills stated in an April 27, 2010, interview with National Public Radio that Marjah stood out as an example of progress within the Helmand Campaign. In the interview, Mills said, "If you go to Marjah today, you will find a city that is free of the Taliban, which has schools that are open, a marketplace, a bazaar. I think the other thing that would strike you would be the relative security of the streets. It's certainly not a totally safe place now, but overall, security has improved. So far, I think things have gone very well."<sup>251</sup>

In three months' time, from the arrival of the first Marines in February 2010 to McChrystal's comments in May 2010, Marjah markets, schools, and bazaars began opening in stark contrast to Marjah daily life under Taliban rule.<sup>252</sup> During a June 2010 interview with the Marine Corps History Division, MEB-A Commander BGen Larry Nicholson offered a more nuanced view of Moshtarak. Nicholson remarked that "any false expectation that Marjah would have a ribbon and a bow tied around it in 30 or 60

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<sup>250</sup> McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 376.

<sup>251</sup> Renee Montagne, "Marines Stabilize Afghan Town of Marjah," *NPR*, April 27, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126297574>.

<sup>252</sup> Moore interview.

days didn't understand Marjah, didn't understand what we were going in against, and certainly didn't understand how long Marjah had been this autonomous republic.”<sup>253</sup> During a Marjah veterans reunion in February 2015, former commanding officer of RCT-7, Col Randy Newman stated, “We were in briefings hearing, ‘Why were we so far behind?’ And we thought we were ahead,” he recalled. “I’ll take the bust for that. I did a lousy job of building appropriate expectations.”<sup>254</sup>

The disconnection between ISAF's and the MEB-A's expectations requires further examination of what America and its allies could accomplish during the ninth year of the Afghan War. ISAF felt political pressure from policymakers to show quick success in Marjah, while MEB-A remained mired in the difficulty of waging a successive counterinsurgency, thus driving a wedge between the two commands. MEB-A viewed incremental progress within Marjah as a reality of waging a counterinsurgency, but in the eyes of ISAF, the slow progress in Marjah tied up precious resources with little to quell external political pressure. Following the introduction of two Marine infantry battalions into Marjah in February 2010, the tactical situation for subsequent Marine units changed for the better, stemming the advance of the Taliban in Helmand.

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<sup>253</sup> Nicholson interview, 2009.

<sup>254</sup> Hope Hodge Seck, “For Marjah Veterans, 5th Anniversary Is Bittersweet,” *Marine Corps Times*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2015/02/20/for-marjah-veterans-5th-anniversary-is-bittersweet/>.

In June 2010, 1/6, transferred southern Marjah to 2nd Battalion, 6th Marines (2/6).<sup>255</sup> In July 2010, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines (3/6) handed over northern Marjah to 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines (2/9).<sup>256</sup> The battalion that assumed responsibility for Marjah in the summer of 2010 faced a weakened, yet determined, enemy forced to the periphery of Marjah by Marines and ANSF. By December 2010, Regional Command-Southwest replaced MEB-A and assumed responsibility for Helmand province. MajGen Richard Mills subsequently declared fighting “essentially over” in Marjah.<sup>257</sup> The situation in Marjah improved to the point where Mills directed one company of 2/9 to move from Marjah to reinforce the Sangin district in December 2010. However, violence in Marjah persisted. During V2/9’s deployment from July 2010 to February 2011 to northern Marjah, the battalion lost fifteen of its members.<sup>258</sup> During 3/6’s seven-month deployment in southern Marjah from July 2010 to January 2011, the battalion lost seventeen of its Marines.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Dan Lamothe, “3/6 Marines Returning to a Different Marjah,” *Battle Rattle*, June 8, 2011, <http://battlerattle.marinecorpstimes.com/2011/06/08/36-marines-returning-to-a-different-marjah-than-what-they-left/>.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> Luis Martinez, “Marine General: The Fight for Marjah Is ‘Essentially Over’,” *ABC News*, December 7, 2010, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/Afghanistan/general-marjah-fight-essentially/story?id=12338362>.

<sup>258</sup> LCpl Andrew Johnston, “2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment Leaves Northern Marjah a Safer Place,” I Marine Expeditionary Force, United States Marines Corps, January 30, 2011, <https://www.imef.marines.mil/Media/News/News-Article-Display/Article/534853/2nd-battalion-9th-marine-regiment-leaves-northern-marjah-a-safer-place/>.

<sup>259</sup> Lamothe, “3/6 Marines Returning to a Different Marjah.”

The Marines who executed Operation Moshtarak reversed the decline of the security situation within Marjah and Helmand Province, meeting both MEB-A and ISAF's goals. Marines secured districts with two infantry battalions along with three brigades from the Afghan Army and police.<sup>260</sup> In response to the presence and tactics of the Marines, the Taliban adapted their tactics. The Taliban focused on emplacing IEDs on roadways, assassinating civilians, and conducting indirect attacks against coalition forces rather than engaging in direct confrontations with the Marines.<sup>261</sup> A survey of Taliban commanders within Helmand from 2011 to 2012 revealed that 20 percent of Taliban combatants were killed in action and even more were detained or injured.<sup>262</sup> MajGen Mills noted in a December 2010 briefing that Taliban fighters once launched attacks in groups of as many as fifteen fighters, but it became more common for the Taliban to employ fighters in groups of four or five.<sup>263</sup> From the start of their deployment until its end in February 2011, 2/9 reported a 75 percent decrease in direct fire and IED incidents within northern Marjah.<sup>264</sup>

GIRoA's initial commitment to governance within Marjah did not match the commitment of ISAF and MEB-A which slowed governance and development gains,

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<sup>260</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 262.

<sup>261</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001-2018* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 156.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Martinez, "Marine General: The Fight for Marjah Is 'Essentially Over'."

<sup>264</sup> Johnston, "2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment Leaves Northern Marjah a Safer Place."

following a series of tactical successes within Marjah. In May 2010, Kael Weston, the political advisor to Nicholson, believed expectations management and limited Afghan capacity prevented Operation Moshtarak from fulfilling its promise.<sup>265</sup> Although the operation stemmed the Taliban's advance within Helmand, the operation's greater ambition—linking Marjah citizens with GIROA—did not materialize due to the lack of Afghan governance capacity following the clearance of Marjah.<sup>266</sup> The troop surge into Afghanistan starting in December 2009 required a pivotal battle, which Moshtarak became. Quick tactical gains made by the Marines in Marjah, however, could not compensate for the lack of GIROA capability and capacity. Weston lamented, “We set ourselves up for an impossible model in the ninth year of the war.”<sup>267</sup>

The presence of the “government in a box” was slow to induce Marjah citizens to embrace GIROA, hindering ISAF's lofty ambitions for Marjah, namely the rapid establishment of governance in the previously ungoverned area. Once in place, the presence of GIROA in Marjah was slow to provide goods and services to Marjah residents.<sup>268</sup> GIROA's appointment of Haji Zahir, an official with limited administrative experience and no previous ties to the district, as the Marjah district governor exhibited the poor emphasis GIROA placed on the stabilization of Marjah.

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<sup>265</sup> Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 146.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>268</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 252.

The security situation improved in the early stages of Operation Moshtarak, but the Taliban continued to perpetrate violence and intimidation. Asking Marjah citizens and tribal leaders to trust Marines, ANSF, and GIRoA while violence continued was asking too much. Moreover, partnering with GIRoA officials who were Marjah outsiders and could not provide critical services such as settling land disputes and administering justice slowed Marjah's acceptance of GIRoA. The external stress placed on Marjah by the Marine offensive upended the complex power structure within the area, adding to its citizens' apprehensions about partnering with the Marines, ANSF, and GIRoA. The promise of the "government in a box" came with unrealistic expectations as security gains were a prerequisite for governance gains in Marjah.

In the absence of Afghan governance and security capacity in Marjah, Marine leaders stepped into the void, assuming risk to their mission and forces while empowering local leaders to thwart the Taliban's influence. LtCol Brian Christmas, commanding officer of 3rd Battalion 6th Marines, forged bonds with tribal leaders within northern Marjah and ultimately assisted in forming local militias.<sup>269</sup> BGen Nicholson and Col Newman endorsed the initiative and provided financial backing to pay the salaries of the local militiamen. LtCol Worth, commanding officer of 1st Battalion 6th Marines, partnered with local leaders in southern Marjah to raise a militia.<sup>270</sup> In June 2010, local leaders who participated in the militia program came together to form a Marjah community council. The innovation displayed by Marines within Marjah demonstrates

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<sup>269</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 255.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

the unique Marine Corps command culture and climate that permitted experimentation in the middle of a war zone. How Marine infantry battalions in Helmand experimented and learned in the middle of a counterinsurgency warrants further study.

### Why Moshtarak Matters

Operation Moshtarak exposed the limits of implementing a counterinsurgency strategy and the expectations of what ISAF could accomplish in Afghanistan. ISAF and MEB-A's hopes to clear Marjah to provide the campaign operational momentum did not meet expectations. ISAF viewed its mission as time-dependent, while MEB-A saw its mission as conditions based. ISAF was content with the announced Afghan troop withdrawal timeline, while the Marines sought patience as they restored security and began stabilizing Marjah. However, a principal who advocated, shaped, and implemented the shift to a counterinsurgency strategy questioned the logic of the policy shift. During an interview with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Navy Captain Jeffrey Eggers provided the oversight agency a stark assessment of American capabilities when attempting to alter the trajectory of the Afghan War. Eggers, a principal drafter of McChrystal's 2009 *Strategic Assessment*, raised the question "Why does the U.S. undertake actions that are beyond its abilities?"<sup>271</sup> Later in his interview with the oversight agency, Eggers stated "This question gets at strategy and human psychology, and it is a hard question to answer."<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 163.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

The Marjah Offensive is not simply a study about counterinsurgency but is a critical case study in joint and multinational operations. Consider that two Marine battalions entered Marjah partnered with an Afghan National Army (ANA) unit. Additionally, an Army Special Forces team partnered with Afghan commandos operating within Marjah. A Marine one-star commander was responsible for the area of operation. MEB-A then reported to a British two-star commander who led Regional Command-South, who then reported to a US Army four-star command. In addition, multiple enablers from various services and governmental organizations supported the planning and execution of Operation Moshtarak. Each entity's biases and planning considerations contributing to Moshtarak added additional friction to an already complex mission. A comprehensive study of the coalition forces' command relationships in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010 requires further examination. A close examination of the planning of Moshtarak offers lessons for future operating environments where partner nations will form joint, multinational organizations to pursue political and military objectives.

Studying Moshtarak offers essential lessons on America's involvement in Afghanistan and can inform future force employment. For students of history and military practice, Moshtarak offers an opportunity to evaluate the assumptions that guided General McChrystal's shift in strategy to counterinsurgency in 2009 as well as the coalition force troop surge allocated for implementing the strategy. A focus of research might be what the new counterinsurgency strategy and additional resources could reasonably have accomplished during the eighth year of conflict within the time allotted. Finally, the question of whether Kandahar Province—not Helmand— should have

received the bulk of surge forces offers future researcher opportunities for additional inquiries.

As the American military currently prepares for high-end conflict to deter and respond to rising threats, it must retain its capability to wage irregular and political warfare globally. Since World War II, most conflicts in which the United States engaged in were irregular warfare, including civil wars, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and information operations. Deploying Marines to Marjah in February 2010 to evict the Taliban from the area resulted from Afghan political and military failures. As GIRoA failed to provide security and services, the Taliban exploited the failures of the delegitimized Afghan government. The Taliban filled the void in security and governance, who then provided order and administered portions of Afghanistan. Often America initiated the application of military might to stabilize an ungoverned or deteriorating section of Afghanistan without an appreciation for the delicate interplay of political, social, tribal, and economic factors that led to political upheaval. As General H. R. McMaster wrote in 2020, “Efforts to address one challenge can exacerbate others and perpetuate rather ameliorate threats to security and prosperity... We need a dose of strategic empathy to develop solutions that addresses the interrelated nature of this problem set.”<sup>273</sup> In the future, the United States must consider how and whether it should apply force when addressing instability around the globe that threatens America’s security interests.

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<sup>273</sup> H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds the Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York, NY: Harper, 2020), 419.

## Marjah Postscript and Kabul's Fall

Thomas Gibbons-Neff fought in Marjah with 1st Battalion, 6th Marines in 2010 and returned to Marjah aboard an Afghan resupply flight in May 2021 as a correspondent with the *New York Times*. After the United States announced its withdrawal of forces in April 2021, After the United States announced its withdrawal of forces in April 2021, Afghan forces attempted to slow the advance of the Taliban as they staged a coup against the Afghan government. Gibbons-Neff's brief stop in Marjah and his dispatch showed how the promise of Marjah had faded by 2021:

We began the descent into (Forward Operating Base) F.O.B. Marja, its blueprint vaguely the way I remembered it. There was a new district center building, but the old skeleton of our base remained, the motor pool still distinguishable as was the spot of ground where we set chairs and a stage, and the rifle tucked between boots for Josh's memorial service. The buildings around it seemed almost completely destroyed: Years of shelling and firefights between the Taliban and American and then Afghan forces had taken its toll.<sup>274</sup>

By August 2021, the Taliban had encircled Kabul and the Marines received the call to secure the Kabul International Airport as Afghan citizens scrambled to leave Kabul while their government crumpled. Marines served with distinction by facilitating the evacuation of noncombatants in the chaotic final days before the country succumbed to the Taliban's advance. The mission came at a high cost on August 26, 2021, as a suicide bomber took the lives of 12 Marines and one Navy corpsman who secured the

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<sup>274</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Jim Huylebroek, "A Siege, a Supply Run and a Descent into a Decade-Old Battle," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/31/world/afghanistan-helmand-marja.html>.

airport.<sup>275</sup> The attack on the checkpoint placed a haunting coda on the American involvement in Afghanistan.

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 ought not to obscure the lessons of Operation Moshtarak. Although America did not achieve its strategic aims in Afghanistan, how the MEB-A planned, prepared, and executed an operation on the scale of Moshtarak warrants review. The disconnect between ISAF and its subordinate command's expectations offers a cautionary case study for the military professional on the importance of aligning ends, ways, expectations, and means. The employment of Marines secured significant yet ultimately tenuous gains in a critical district previously under the control of the Taliban. How the Marines cleared, held, and built Marjah in a brief time is an intriguing case study in policy decision-making, operational design, and counterinsurgency. Scholars, practitioners, and policymakers should consider Moshtarak when the United States employs the Marine Corps, partners with host-nation militaries, and builds partner national governance capacity in the future.

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<sup>275</sup> Matthieu Aikins, Sharif Hassan, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Eric Schmitt, and Richard Pérez-peña, "Suicide Bombers in Kabul Kill Dozens, Including 13 U.S. Troops," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/26/world/asia/kabul-airport-bombing.html>.

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