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War & Peace



Helmand (2): The chain of chiefdoms unravels

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Under threat since 2014: The Sangin district governor's office, with hesco barriers (Source: Pajhwok Afghan News, 2015)

In Helmand in the second half of 2015, the 'dominos' started to fall, with successive areas of the province coming under Taliban control. During the United States surge, a line of 'chiefdoms' was created, where Afghan National Police (ANP), Afghan Local Police (ALP) and militia commanders managed to consolidate control of local areas. In 2015, these came under pressure and were overrun by the Taliban one by one. Ghost soldiers in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and some disastrous redeployments of key ANP and ALP commanders have weakened government defences while, at the same time, the Taliban have introduced a new military formation, well-equipped and mobile commando-like 'qet'a' units. AAN guest author, Rahmatullah Amiri* examines why so much of Helmand has fallen to the Taliban in the last year.

AAN's [first dispatch on Helmand](#) looked at the background to the current crisis, focussing on provincial power dynamics on the government side, the rise of the ALP and militias in key districts and the British deployment, US surge (when 11,000 US troops were sent to Helmand to crush the insurgency – half of all the extra troops) and withdrawal.

The Taleban counter-attack

The Taleban's post-surge return started in Helmand's northern areas: in Kajaki, the Qala-ye Gaz area of Gereshk (where the Taleban had had a stronghold for years due to support from the local Ishaqzai tribe), the Malmand area of Sangin (which the Taleban never lost control of, even during the surge), and some areas of northern Musa Qala.

From the north, they targeted Musa Qala's district centre, which they considered the main threat to them and an important prize to be won. Their first success came in April 2012 when a group of suicide bombers attacked the formidable district police chief, [Kumandan Koka](#), inside the main police station, injuring him seriously and forcing him to leave his post. At the time, local communities did not see any immediate impact on security. In particular, the presence of foreign troops and their role in planning and executing attacks on the Taleban masked the impact of Koka's absence. His brother, Haji Dost Muhammad, took over his position as police chief. In 2013 and 2014, the Taleban were able to make gains in some areas of the district, but the ANA and ANP's strong presence across northern Helmand still kept them in check.

It was in mid-2014 that the Taleban carried out their first major attacks against key bases in Musa Qala district. They were unable to capture any. They used up the ammunition for the larger weapons they had captured during those attacks and were running low on supplies and this forced them to change their approach; they started to concentrate on smaller government outposts. They also set their eyes on Nowzad, located to the west of Musa Qala, as it appeared to be an easier target, with the ANP and ANA less strongly entrenched there. The Taleban captured a few key check posts in the Muzrabad area connecting Musa Qala with Sangin district. The Taleban were able to move freely in most of the areas of Musa Qala and could easily advance into other parts of Sangin. In late 2014/early 2015, the Taleban, approaching from Zamindawar in northern Kajaki, crossed the Helmand River and captured the small sliver of southern Kajaki district that was still under the control of the government – with the exception of the district centre. The Taleban used this area south of the Helmand River to connect its fighters with other areas they already held in Musa Qala and Sangin. This led to their first consolidation of territorial control in that part of the province. Now in the north, only Nowzad was still under government control, but small-scale attacks continued in April and May 2015 across the district.

In summer 2015, the Taleban managed for the first time to come [dangerously close to taking the district centre of Sangin](#), which lies to the south of Musa Qala and Kajaki in the north-east of Helmand province. However, their first major victory came on 28 July 2015 when [Nowzad's administrative centre fell](#) to them. In this attack, the Taleban captured an enormous amount of weapons, ammunition cache and vehicles. Word of mouth spread across many areas of northern Helmand about this victory, and within days, the Taleban were gathering in the desert to prepare for a major offensive against Musa Qala centre.

First, in mid-June 2015, the Taleban attacked one of the key bases of the Afghan National Army (ANA) in

the district, which is located only one mile away from the district centre. During [this attack](#), the Taliban managed to kill 19 soldiers. This attack, along with the capture of the Nowzad weapons cache, drained ANSF morale, especially the ANA's.

On the night of 18 June 2015, the Taliban attacked Musa Qala district centre. Most of the troops involved in its defence were ANP. According to a policeman who survived, an ANA commander had suggested a tactical retreat to police chief Dost Muhammad when the Taliban closed in on the main bazaar. He rejected this and accused the ANA commander of not wanting to fight the Taliban. During the attack, the police chief and his deputy Khaksar were shot and injured and had to retreat to Lashkargah. Troops however remained in the ANA main base, known as 'Roshan Tower' (it has since been given up, on 21 February 2016, as part of what was called a tactical retreat). The rest of the ANP then retreated so quickly that some policemen were left behind and were either captured or killed by Taliban.

Lack of coordination on the government side and a failure to recognise the significance of previous minor Taliban successes or prepare for a larger onslaught had contributed to the Taliban being able to capture Musa Qala district centre. (See AAN's then first analysis of this event [here](#).) Haji Dost Muhammad and Khaksar were removed from their positions by Kabul due to their retreat. Their homes were searched after an accusation that they had collaborated with the Taliban and enabled the fall of the district. The Taliban's capture of Musa Qala also meant they captured more weapons, equipment and ammunition. They thereby replenished their resources.

An attempt by ANA and ALP to recapture the district centre within a week of its fall was unsuccessful and they had to retreat into the main ANA base, which is separated from the district centre by the bed of the Musa Qala River. The riverbed was slowly filling with water after heavy rains in the mountains, which meant another attempt to recapture the district centre became far trickier. The danger was that, if the Taliban counter-attacked, the only way back would be through the now dangerous river. The ANSF advanced from their base, but in order to avoid being trapped on the district centre side of the river left the bazaar area even before the Taliban could try to repel them. Afghan special forces, who arrived a few days after the initial attempt by the ANA and ALP to retake the district centre, had to face an intense two-day fight with the Taliban forces. After the arrival of reinforcements for the Taliban, they were able to force the Afghan special forces out of the bazaar area of Musa Qala.

The patchwork of small chiefdoms controlled by ALP and militia commanders who might each only control a small pockets of population in a *manteqa* (a small area within a district), where they had recruited and lead local fighters against the Taliban during the surge were coming under threat. The chiefdoms were like dots along a line, from Musa Qala in the north to Gereshk on the ring road and onwards to Marja, forming a more or less continuous corridor of territory that was mostly under pro-government forces' control. However, in the second half of 2015, these small chiefdoms were overrun one by one.

There were weaknesses on the government side; estimates that 40 per cent or more of the official number of soldiers and police only existed on paper have been made (see [here](#) and [here](#)). 'Ghost soldiers' were no defence against the Taliban. One US general [described](#) the 215 Maiwand Corp as displaying "a combination of incompetence, corruption and ineffectiveness."

The weakness – and in many places, effective absence – of the ANA was not the only problem. After the surge and particularly after the security transition and withdrawal of foreign forces, the Taliban enjoyed greater freedom to rebuild and expand their networks. Without the threat of air attack, they could now mass in ways that had been perilous before. The insurgents became increasingly able to carry out quick, decisive strikes in strategic areas, intimidating the ALP and small militia commanders who often saw their fighters fleeing their check posts when the Taliban advanced. However, another new strategy introduced by the Taliban in mid-2015, a way of organising their fighting men, also seems to have made a crucial difference on the battlefield.

From mahaz to qet'a: the Taliban's new strategy

Right after Akhtar Muhammad Mansur took over as the *de facto* leader of the Taliban following Mullah Muhammad Omar's secret death in April 2013, he started looking at ways to restructure the Taliban's military organisation. Up until then, the movement's forces had mainly been based on the *mahaz* (front) system. Each *mahaz* was locally mobilised by a commander and was part of a multi-level hierarchy of district and provincial commanders, ultimately falling under the movement's military commission. A *mahaz* in Musa Qala could have about five commanders, with 10 to 30 fighters each. So, a *mahaz* could have anywhere between 200 and 1000 men in one area. Not all of these would go to the frontline to fight at the same time. For any major Taliban offensive, each *mahaz* would be asked to contribute men. After the operation, the fighters would go home to their own areas. This approach was often not very effective and was rather expensive to equip and maintain. It meant that there were more men equipped to fight than were participating in the fighting at any one time. It has some advantages in the long run, for example being able to get fresh fighters in rotation. Overall, however, it is costly and inefficient.

The fronts have now been supplemented with a new, more permanent, military-like structure – the *qet'a* (unit in Dari, Pashto and originally in Arabic). The *mahaz* system was not entirely dismantled, but it has become less influential as *qet'as* were assigned to critical districts and areas in addition to the *mahaz* fighters already present. The long-term plan appears to be to roll the *qet'a* system out across the entire country. However, right now, only provinces with contested districts seem to have *qet'as* already in place.

The *qet'a* system is based on groups of up to 220 fighters with sub-groups of 20 men who operate together. Unlike the *mahaz* fighters, those in the *qet'a* are more mobile, often better trained and equipped, and are shifted around within a province or even between provinces to wherever they are most needed. The training is organised on a rotating basis, with 20 fighters at a time receiving a few weeks' instruction on military strategy and the use of arms, so that when the Taliban capture ANSF weapons or equipment, they are familiar with their use. The training camps are reportedly mostly around an area called Qala-ye Gaz, an Ishaqzai stronghold in Gereshk district. The current deputy shadow provincial governor, Muzamil, an Ishaqzai from the area is actively supervising operations and training.

Qet'as had been seen even before Nowzad was captured in June 2015 – six to seven *qet'a* came from other districts of Helmand fought alongside the local *mahaz* there. According to local sources in Musa Qala, it took the Taliban three days and 800 fighters to capture Nowzad. The Taliban were able to gather a lot of weapons and other equipment, which allowed them to continue fighting in other areas. Members of local ANP forces interviewed for this report mentioned that the Taliban now have 'Darazkof' guns – a type

of Russian-made sniper rifle officially known as Dragunov, which, along with RPGs and other weapons, they had captured from the ANA. According to the source, the Taleban had not only captured these weapons, but also trained some of their fighters to use them well. With sniper rifles in their arsenals, the Taleban have been able to target ANA bases at long-range by taking out the guard posts on the towers. News of this new tactic by the well-trained *qet'as* spread quickly among the local population and the ANSF. Famous as '*sra qet'a*' (Pashto for 'red unit'), these special sniper groups have had a huge impact on the morale of the ANSF as they feel more vulnerable. Another sign that the *qet'as* are more organized are that some wear uniform-like outfits, as opposed to traditional local clothing.

Furthermore, in some areas, after the capturing ANA and ANP bases and check posts, the *qet'a* have been asking locals to dismantle these bases, for example in Marja, as seen [here](#). This systematic dismantling (which the *mahaz* did not do) prevents the ANSF from being able to quickly re-establish themselves in an area after an initial defeat; the option of quickly re-taking a post is no longer available to them.

The *qet'a* played a major role in the capture of Musa Qala on 26 August 2015. The fighting brought in units not just from this district, but also from across the province and even from neighbouring Kandahar. Overall, a local source told AAN, at least 2000 fighters from Baghran, Marja, Nadali, Sangin and Gereshk and from outside the province participated in the fight. After they captured Musa Qala, and as the Taliban were advancing on Gereshk and Lashkargah, the stories of the powerful *qet'as* spread. While many of the tales were exaggerations, they were very effective in dampening the morale of the ANSF fighters.

Given their success in Helmand, the *qet'as* are now spreading and the Taleban is using them strategically in Kandahar, Zabul and Kunduz – or at least these are the provinces where their presence could be confirmed through interviews with the local population. The Mansur group is behind the *qet'a* system, thereby, also using this new strategy to prove themselves on the battlefield.

The introduction of the *qet'a* system in Helmand has not gone completely smoothly, though. The Ishaqzai tribe, that was the leading force in planning the capture of Nowzad in 29 July 2015, captured many items, including weapons, which were collected and brought to the local Taleban leadership. There, these items would be 'sold' by the fighters to the leadership. The money received in exchange would then be distributed among the fighters who had participated in the attack. The *qet'a* fighters from Musa Qala, who had come to support the local *mahaz*, felt they did not get their fair share. (In the Taleban's Code of Conduct, or *Layha*, the section on distributing 'booty' is [long and complex](#), suggesting how important and divisive this can be.)

The problems over booty may be a sign of an emerging rivalry between *mahaz* and *qet'a* groups. The switch to the new system has upset most of the *mahaz* leaders who feel bypassed because now almost all the power is concentrated within the new groups – from the *qet'a* commander down to its fighters. While the new system has proven effective for capturing territory, it marginalises and antagonises the traditional *mahaz* leaders. Switching to this more conventional military system also runs the risk of defeat by more conventional warfare tactics. The *mahaz* system was far less vulnerable to air strikes, for example, as only a few fighters from each *mahaz* would go to the front lines at any one time.

Without US close air support, the ANSF have been more vulnerable to the *qet'as*. However, air support

available to the ANSF is growing again, both from Afghanistan's own fledgling air force and from the US. This may make it more difficult for the Taliban *qet'as* to remain successful in the long run.

Counterstrategy: Organising local 'uprisings' – ALP commanders

As a reaction to so much of Helmand falling to the Taliban, members of parliament from the province devised a new plan to try to hold back the tide. The new plan looks very much like an old one: arm local communities so that they can become able to defend themselves and their homes. Only the name changes, from ALP to *patsunian* (uprising forces). With this, Helmand has followed in the footsteps of Ghazni and Kandahar where similar engagements with local communities in critical districts have taken place since 2012 (see AAN reports on [Ghazni](#) and [Kandahar](#)).

The [initiative started in November 2015 in Nawa district](#) in central Helmand. The majority of the local population there are from the Barakzai tribe and have traditionally backed the government. Hundreds of weapons were distributed to newly-hired civilian 'community forces', with around 400 men joining the new force. The aim was that they would protect their district, given the inability of the ANSF to do so. Abdul Wadud Popal, a member of parliament from Helmand, appeared to support the initiative, which might also have been, in effect, an attempt to protect Lashkargar.

The government soon expanded this new initiative into Musa Qala. There, the plan was to re-arm the former police commander Haji Dost Muhammad and his former deputy Khaksar who had lost their jobs after the fall of Musa Qala in June 2015. Despite the earlier mistrust of them, Musa Qala presented too much of a challenge to find other leaders, from within or outside the district, to take over the position. Haji Dost Muhammad and Khaksar remained the only key actors who were perceived as being able to operate in the area and effectively stand against the Taliban.

A blow by blow account of how areas and districts came to fall in late 2015 and early 2016

What follows is a detailed account of the 'dominos' falling to the Taliban largely since the summer of 2015, taking into account the new Taliban *qet'a* tactic and the formation of uprising groups. In some cases, we start telling the story a little earlier so that the narrative locally makes sense.

Closing in on Gereshk

Gereshk, the second most populous district in the province, had been relatively secure, but the Taliban had a lucky break there in spring 2015. At the time, they were still ramping up their campaign for control of Nowzad and Musa Qala to the north when, on 1 April, an IED hit the local Gereshk strongman, Commander Hekmatullah, as he drove to a check post. Hekmatullah had often been referred to as the 'Razeq of Gereshk,' an allusion to the powerful police chief of Kandahar province who, with ruthless means, had established some sense of security in the city and surrounding areas. Hekmatullah was known for frequently leaving his headquarters in order to go out to fight the Taliban along with his troops. This was also the case on the fateful day in April: he had been on his way to the Zanbuli area (more on this below) to avert a possible Taliban tunnel attack against a post. The ALP later discovered that preparation

had indeed been made for such an attack.

Hekmatullah (or Hekmat as he was commonly known) was a Barakzai from the Malgir area of Gereshk and the son of one of the four original strongmen of Helmand, the former army chief turned MP, Ma'alim Mir Wali. Similar to Razeq in Kandahar, Hekmat was known to have complete authority over his men and knew Gereshk like the back of his hand.

In his five years as Gereshk police chief, Hekmat had been able to set up a well-established security cordon around Gereshk's district centre. He was a graduate of the police academy, but this was not the key to his success, which lay partly in that he was allowed to make decisions with regards to security on his own; he had the political support of his father and had gained the trust of the Ministry of Interior.

According to local interviewees, Hekmat understood that effective leadership of troops is the most important factor in keeping the Taleban out. He preferred to work with local troops and sub-commanders and even ALP commanders, as he knew that they would be dedicated to the protection of the district and treat the local population well. Gereshk became one of the few districts in Helmand where the government actually controlled areas outside the district centre. This included densely populated areas such as the Deh Adam Khan and Malgir *manteqas*, in the irrigated 'green zone' along Helmand River. The ability to control the district was due to Hekmat having set up a network of sub-commanders on the *manteqa* level. Most notably, Hekmat could rely on Muhammad Wali in Malgir, some 15 kilometres to the southwest of the district centre, and Kamal Aka in Deh Adam Khan, only a few kilometres from Gereshk centre to the east. Kamal Aka had taken up arms against the Taleban after they first threatened him and later kidnapped his son. He kept security well, people said, and did not interfere in their business.

The Taleban tried to capture Malgir four times in 2015. This densely populated agricultural area is strategically important, not only for Gereshk, but for the entire province. It lies on the major southern access road to Gereshk district centre and is also connected to the Babaji area, which is part of Lashkargah district. It is also close to Nadali district. Full control over Gereshk district would give the Taleban access to Kandahar's Maiwand district (opening up a continuous route between northern Helmand via Maiwand that would allow access to Pakistan). However, the immediate priority for the Taleban appears to have been to get into a position to threaten Lashkargah from the Babaji area.

Hekmat's local man, Muhammad Wali, had been able to keep the Taleban out of the entire Malgir area. After Hekmat's death, however, Gereshk's new police chief, Ismail (by tribe, a Seryani, and from Malgir), switched Muhammad Wali from his post in Malgir to Gereshk district centre. Ismail is the cousin of Ma'alem Mir Wali: Hekmat had been Ma'alem Mir Wali's son (see our first dispatch on Helmand for details of the strongmen), so Ismail had, in effect, 'inherited' the district police chief post when Hekmat was killed.

Muhammad Wali, who was known for his charismatic leadership, was reluctant to leave Malgir where he had been head of the police for almost five years. Local people reported Ma'alem Mir Wali deliberately removed him from Malgir to help his cousin, Ismail, the new district police commander, because he thought some of the ANP and ALP commanders might not listen to Ismail in the same way as they had listened to Hekmat because he was new to the position.

So, at a critical time, Malgir got a new police commander, a man by the name of Naser. Before being assigned to Malgir, Naser had been serving as commander of Spina Posta (Spina check post) on the ring road. He had been appointed to this lucrative position because Hekmat was his relative. After 2009, all the trucks that used to take workers and supplies to the international military Shorabak Base were taxed at this check post. Some say that Naser would make thousands of Afghanis (hundreds of dollars) everyday from illegally taxing the trucks.

The Taleban had failed to take Malgir repeatedly in 2015, but within one day of Naser's arrival in Malgir, they attacked, and within two days, in mid-October 2015, the Taleban had captured all the posts in the Malgir area. Naser and his men fled to check posts along the main Boghra Wiala (irrigation canal). Even these, they subsequently lost. Today, about 99 per cent of Malgir is under Taleban control; the exceptions are the few check posts between Spin Masjid and Gereshk Bazaar (a distance of roughly 10 kilometres).

One reason for the swift fall was that the new commander, Naser, was not as close to his men as Muhammad Wali had been. Muhammad Wali had supported the checkpoints under his command with anything they needed and there was efficient coordination in the defence of the area. The morale of the police was high. While Naser knew the terrain, he was not prepared on day one to lead his men as Muhammad Wali had done. Secondly, and more importantly, Naser came to the job just when the Taleban had probably become too strong for the government to deal with it because of the new *qet'a* system. It may be that even if Muhammad Wali had not been replaced, Malgir would have fallen.

The next area to come into the sights of the Taleban was Kamal Aka's 'chiefdom' in Deh Adam Khan. Kamal, a local Barakzai, used to be the *mirab* (water manager, a well-respected job) of the Deh Adam *wiala* (irrigation canal). One of Kamal's sons was a Taleban group commander, so many in the area had thought Kamal to be pro-Taleban, but apparently he had no direct connection with them. However, in 2012, for unknown reasons, his son came into a conflict with his fellow Taleban who beat him up. Kamal went after his son's enemies, detained a couple of them and tied them to a tree, publicly shaming them. The Taleban moved to take revenge, attempted to detain Kamal and attacked his house, but his large family was able to defend the compound. From there on, Kamal launched a private campaign against the Taleban. The community approved of it, as it was a matter of personal honour, not a fight for political or ideological reasons.

During those events, Commander Hekmat (then still alive) repeatedly approached Kamal Aka with an offer to join the ALP. A similar offer came from the Taleban. But a reconciliation attempt with the Taleban failed, and when Kamal lost a brother in renewed fighting, he finally gave in to Hekmat. In 2013, Kamal was appointed head of ALP in the Deh Adam Khan area where he enjoyed the full support of the local communities who had asked him to secure the area.

Closing in on Lashkargah

In the third week of October 2015, right after the Taleban's capture of large areas of Malgir, the area of Babaji, considered a suburb of Lashkargah city, was successfully attacked by the Taleban. The fall of Babaji was a direct consequence of the fall of Malgir as the two areas share a border – once Malgir had been taken, the Taleban were able to move on Babaji. As Kamal had proven himself a skilled commander,

he was ordered by the provincial chief of police of Helmand to go to Babaji to help recapture the area from the Taleban. After initially blocking further Taleban advances and helping secure safe passage for dozens of ANSF under siege, Kamal made a tactical retreat from the area and returned to Deh Adam Khan in late November 2015; in the meantime, in his home area, the Taleban had received enforcements in the form of more *qet'as*. As of early March 2016, when this dispatch was posted, Babaji was heavily contested. ANSF has been making continuous attempts to retake the area, as the Taleban still appeared to be in control of significant parts of the area.

On 19 December 2015, Kamal Aka had still been able to repel a large Taleban attack on Deh Adam Khan, but [his forces suffered many casualties](#). The situation deteriorated. Kamal Aka had to send his family to Gereshk centre and finally he also had to give in. Kamal Aka knew he would not get any support from Gereshk centre, as he had already experienced this during the first Taleban attack in October. Furthermore, he knew that the few good men he had left would not be able to stand against the Taleban and he was not able to sacrifice any more men – especially if there was no support from the government. Rather than being defeated in battle, he and his men chose to retreat and give up the area – after they were able to evacuate anyone who wanted to flee from the approaching Taleban. [Deh Adam Khan fell to the Taleban on 15 January 2016](#). With Deh Adam Khan under Taleban control, the Afghan government lost an important rural area of Gereshk under the control of their forces. In order to prevent the Taleban to encroach further in the direction of Gereshk district centre from the Deh Adam Khan area, the ANSF established a chain of check posts. On 10 March 2016, the Taleban attacked this chain of check posts known as the Deh Adam Khan front and captured at least one of these key check posts. Some Taleban forces were able to advance to the outskirts of the Gereshk district centre. This has already caused hundreds of families to flee the area, fearing that the ANSF are not able to fight back the Taleban anymore.

The Taleban in Zambuli

Zanbulai is an area that has never been completely under government or international military control and, since 2006, has seen some of the most intense fighting in Gereshk district. One of the main reasons for this is that it borders Mirmandaw, which is only separated from the Qala-ye Gaz area by the Helmand River and is one of the main insecure areas of Gereshk, never having fully come under government control. Similarly, Qala-ye Gaz, despite numerous operations by international forces in the area, has always remained a Taleban stronghold. The majority of residents of Qala-ye Gaz are Ishaqzai and well-connected with their fellow tribesmen across the district border in Sangin. Since the emergence of the *qet'a* system, Qala-ye Gaz has become the location of one of the Taleban training camps.

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Two villages in Zanbulai, which had ALP units, established with the help of foreign forces, did continue to fight alongside the ANSF in the area. Two commanders, Khalifa and Baqi Mama, were in charge of these villages. The Taleban began their offensive against the two villages on 17 December 2015. During this attack, the Taleban did not only target the ALP fighters, but reportedly deliberately aimed munitions at the local population – inflicting significant civilian casualties. According to local interviewees, the Taleban killed many children, women and elderly men as well as the ALP fighters. Local interviewees believed the Taleban wanted to ‘teach the community a lesson’ to show other communities what happens when they collectively join the ALP. Right before and during the attack, some families fled the Makatab area of Gereshk city, where they are still staying.

Commander Khalifa was killed during the initial attack, but Baqi Mama managed to hide when Taleban captured the villages on 18 December 2015. The following day, according to local interviewees, foreign special forces (reportedly American) carried out a night raid in the area and managed to rescue him and other ALP soldiers who were hiding. Zanbulai is still very much under Taleban control. Together with the attack from the Deh Adam Khan area (see above), the Taleban also advanced towards Gereshk district center from the Zanbulai. However, as of 11 March 2016, the Taleban forces are still fighting to break through to Gereshk centre from the direction of Zanbulai.

When this dispatch was published, ANSF were trying to defend Gereshk on several fronts: Deh Adam Khan and Zanbulai, but also from the direction of Spinmasjid (where the last few checkpost under ANSF were also lost to the Taleban in the beginning of March). Gereshk district center, the second largest populated area in Helmand, is now under greater threat than ever before.

Marja

Marja district also in central Helmand came under pressure after the collapse of Malgir in mid-October 2016, one of the key areas of Gereshk, which neighbours Marja to the north-east. The Taleban had initially planned to take Nadali district first, however, when one of the key commanders from Marja was killed (see below), the Taleban used this opportunity to focus on the presumably now less well-defended Marja district first.

Marja is one of the areas of Helmand, which foreign forces lost many lives and spent millions of dollars regaining control of from the Taleban. It was chosen as the first operation of the surge, in February 2010 and was supposed to be a model for other contested areas in the battle to win communities’ **‘hearts and minds’**.

The key local figure in charge of Marja’s defence was Haji Muhammad Asef, from the local Wardak tribe and a former mujahed. He also was active in the District Development Assembly, in which the various elected Community Development Councils come together. When the surge started in late 2009, US forces tried very hard to convince Haji Asef to join the ALP. He refused – until his relationship with Taleban turned sour. In 2011, armed Taleban came to Haji Asef’s area and, by chance, encountered a group of US soldiers. The insurgents asked Haji Asef to hide their weapons, but he refused as he assumed the US soldiers had observed his interaction with the insurgents from afar. Indeed, shortly after the Taleban left the area, the US soldiers retrieved the weapons that the Taleban had dumped, leading to Taleban accusations

that Haji Asef had informed on them.

A few weeks later, the insurgents kidnapped Haji Asef's son. After an attempt to release him through local leaders failed, Haji Asef gathered his relatives, armed them, went to a village where a few Taleban families lived and took some of them hostage himself. When his son managed to escape from the Taleban, Haji Asef also released his hostages, but he eventually also joined the ALP.

Due to his leadership skills, Haji Asef then became head of all ALP units in the district. But as Marja is the home of many different Pashtun tribal groups, *naqelin* settled there decades ago as a result of the HAVA irrigation scheme, the units were more difficult to unite under a single tribal elder than those in the more homogenous communities in other areas of Helmand. Hence, local ALP commanders under Haji Asef's command were in charge of the various areas with their distinct communities. The ALP commanders managed to keep the Taleban out of the densely populated areas, but never managed to completely defeat them in the Sistani desert to the west of the population centre. Despite the millions of dollars invested in projects and one of the biggest military operations since the invasion of US forces. Throughout 2013 and 2014, the Taleban initiated many attacks from the desert areas, but failed to make significant gains.

After government officials observed that the ALP in Marja were able to keep the Taleban at bay over a long period of time, they became overconfident and assumed that the local fighters could continue the defence without their commander. In a move similar to the disastrous redeployment of Kamal Aka from Deh Adam Khan to Gereshk, Haji Asef was called, in mid-August 2015, to help fight the Taleban in Nadali district in order to prevent an attack on the direction of Lashkargah. He then came under Taleban attack. During this fighting, his vehicle was shot at and he was injured and died on the way to the hospital. His son was appointed in his place, but did not have the same authority over his fighters.

One week after Asef's death, the Taleban launched a major attack on the Sistani area of Marja, which is located at the edge of the Sistani desert to the west of the populated areas of the district. [Commander Firoza](#) was in charge of this area but, without Asef's support, had to retreat. The Taleban captured the area and burnt her house. Another part of Sistani, known as Block 9, which was under the authority of another commander, Moto Khan, also fell within days.

After Haji Asef's death, coordination between the various ALP sub-commanders in Marja broke down and the Taleban met no further significant resistance. ALP members from the area told AAN that the ANP and ANA did put up any fight – many of them offered no resistance and simply retreated. Some interviewees said they believed the ANA had not been able to intervene to fight alongside the ANP and ALP because they were waiting for orders. In the end, the majority of the fighting was done by the ALP units, which had been set up by the foreign forces. Once these ALP units had to face the Taleban attacks alone, they crumbled one by one. It seems the majority of the communities in Marja had only sided with the government or joined the ALP because, during times when there was no fighting, it looked a reasonable economic bet: they would receive development projects and also a salary from the foreign troops. However, the men enrolled in the ALP program had never been tested before in fighting the Taleban.

Another reason why some areas of Marja fell without a fight was the success of Taleban propaganda in promoting the ferocity of the 'Sra Qet'a' (the 'red unit') who fight under the threatening slogan: "Be

captured or die!” Apart from spreading propaganda by word of mouth, the Taliban used mosque loudspeakers to urge ANSF members to desert their units. According to local interviewees, this propaganda has been particularly strong in Nadali, Sangin and Marja, where the announcements included the following: “Leave your weapons and your positions and come to us and we will forgive you.” This propaganda was in some areas underscored by Taliban snipers reportedly shooting at ANP watch towers with precision weapons – killing several ANP with shots to the head from a distance. Apparently, the sniper rifles had been captured during the takeover of ANA bases in Helmand and the *qet’a* members had received training on how to use them. ALP members, presumably in the greatest danger, were also encouraged to desert their units with the promise of safe passage. Many of the ALP foot soldiers were told by the Taliban to disappear from their ALP units without saying a word, turn off their phones and either leave the area or return to their homes.

Since November/December 2015, the Taliban have gained significant influence in Marja, in particular, in terms of moving through the district and attacking ANSF positions in most areas, the exception being the few kilometres of road connecting the district centre with Lashkargah (from the Bolan area to the Kemp area), the district centre and some other areas. Since the beginning of February 2016, the Taliban have also been able to tax local communities. Although many locals had already left the district, Taliban have been able to collect 30 to 40 million Pakistani rupees (about 281,000 to 381,000 US dollars) from local residents as tax of their lands (estimate published on Salam Watandar website no longer accessible). These funds support the insurgency fighters in Marja and the rest of the province, allowing the Taliban to continue to try to chip away at the last areas of the district still held by the government.

Nadali

Whereas lack of coordination and cooperation between the various ANSF troops, the ALP, the local community and the government led to the fall of Marja, in Nadali, which came under attack first, the situation has been different. The network of commanders and elders collaborated with the ANSF to ensure that the little chiefdoms in Nadali remained intact and could therefore contribute effectively to the defence of the district as a whole. After the fall of Marja, the Taliban wanted to storm Nadali district centre, but since the Nadali chief of police coordinated with all the local commanders ahead of the Taliban attack, government forces were able to withstand the attacks (coming from two directions, from Marja in the north and from desert areas to the west). However, the Taliban have managed to menace government-controlled areas.

It was in late October 2015 that the Taliban turned their attention to Nadali for the first time. At this point, they were not trying to capture Marja, because they knew communities there would not offer any support, while, they believed, a few villages in Nadali were sympathetic. In late October 2015, they planned an attack on the Loya Manda area of Nadali. Overnight, they sent fighters from several different directions and in the morning, launched attacks on ANP, ALP and ANA check posts in a coordinated effort. They were able to capture this area. The ANSF left in a tactical retreat – after experiencing heavy casualties with 17 men dead.

After Loya Manda, the Taliban also managed to capture Kofaka, which borders the, by then, already Taliban-controlled Babaji suburb of Lashkargah. In addition, Taliban captured the nearby villages of 31

Gharbi (where Haji Mohammad Asef from Marja was killed) and 31 Sharqi (these names make reference to the block set up of the area), located eight kilometres to the northeast of Nadali district centre. Next, the Taleban attacked the Changir area to the north of 31 Gharbi and 31 Sharqi. Then, after first capturing the Domandi area they reached Shawal to the northwest of Nadali district centre. They were able to consolidate their control in Shawal. By the beginning of November 2015, the Shawal and Changir area represented the new front line.

One of the key commanders of Shawal is Muhammad Sadiq (an Ishaqzai from Nadali) who is in charge of two out of the three sub-divisions in the area. Despite only being 28 years old, Muhammad Sadiq is recognized as a great fighter, as he has been fighting the Taleban almost every night for the last four months. The person controlling the third area is Nasim, a Nurzai from Nadali. He has approximately 15 men under his command. He has also been fighting the Taleban for the past three months. His brother was Hayat Khan, who had six ANP check posts in another area in Nadali, but was killed in an IED attack six months ago. Muhammad Sadiq and Nasim worked closely with the local head of the district council, Nabi Khan (a Sulaimankhail from Zarghoun Kalay). In addition, Nabi Khan also supported these two commanders. They are considered the heroes of Nadali for their efforts in pushing back against the Taleban front line because although both commanders are from the district, their home villages are not in the areas where they have been fighting so successfully. The local populations in Shawal and Changir (known locally as the north front), but also in the other areas listed below, are reportedly very concerned about what would happen if any of the commanders get killed. This would certainly mean that the areas would then fall to the Taleban, a local respondent stated, as there would not be enough time to find another commander to take over the defense.

To the west of the Nadali district centre, the ANSF have been fighting to keep the Taleban out for the last four months. This fighting has taken place along a 72 kilometre long front line, which has been a focus of the Taleban offensive. The main areas under attack have been Nurzai Kalay, Cha Mirza, Shin Kalay, Khoshal Kalay, and Sayed Abad Kalay along the western edge of the populated area of the district. The following militia commanders have been fighting to keep the Taleban at bay:

- Nurzai Kalay's defence is lead by Commander Wakil Bor Muhammad, a Nurzai from Cha Mirza with ALP and ANP under his command.
- The large area of Shin Kalay has two famous commanders, Jamal and Nisar, both Khorati, who coordinate with the ALP and ANP.
- In Khoshal Kalay, Shakir, a Nurzai is the commander of ANP and ALP.
- In Sayedabad, Waikil Ghulam Shakhi, a Hazara, is in charge of protecting the area with his own men.

So far, these commanders have tried to do their best to ensure they can hold the entire 72-kilometre front, while also protecting the district on the Marja side. However given that fighting has been going on for more than three months now, there is concern that a decisive push from the Taleban might be able to take down the government's fatigued lines of defence. According to the head of the Nadali shura, Nabi Khan, if these

commanders do not receive some support, there is a very strong likelihood that the district will fall into the hands of Taleban. Nabi Khan said that, officially, the battalion of ANA soldiers in his area should number 772, but currently there are no more than 274 soldiers. The ANA also has approval for 59 tanks or armoured vehicles; now, the locals think there are no more than 11. The ANA is operating mostly independently of the local commanders, local people said, and does not coordinate with the ALP and ANP. This has also led to the fear that, if there is a serious attack, the ANA will not support local fighters on the ground.

Sangin

Sangin is home to two main tribes, the Ishaqzai and Alekozai. The Ishaqzai has never been part of the post-2001 government because Amir Dado immediately took control of the entire district. The Ishaqzai, feeling completely marginalized by this exclusion from politics and by extension access to resources (including the drugs trade), hence stood against the government. At the same time, very few development projects have been completed in Sangin district compared to the other districts further south – in part, because Taleban have been in control in the areas around Sangin since 2006.

According to local interviewees, Sangin has never had an important pro-government strongman other than Amir Dado. Since he was assassinated in 2009, there has been nobody to take his position – as Sangin's local Ishaqzai are not pro-government at the best of times. Even during the surge, but afterwards as well, Sangin (like Musa Qala) faced a lot of resistance from pockets of Taleban, especially in the Sarwan Qala area, due to its proximity to Kajaki district. It is an Alekozai area in the north of the district and saw fighting between 2012 and 2014. Sarwan Qala borders Musa Qala to the west, Sangin to the south (1) and the Zamindawar area, of Kajaki district (only separated by the Helmand River) to the north. During the surge, US forces never cleared Zamindawar. So the Taleban – crossing the river in boats – could use the area to attack Sarwan Qala from. By 2013, the Taleban were slowly advancing on Sarwan Qala. The ANA and ALP (mostly Alkozai) were fighting back hard, but the Taleban were continuously trying to take the area. In late 2013, they were able to capture some of the checkpoints in Sarwan Qala and, at the beginning of 2014, the area was captured by the Taleban. (2) This area, along with the Malmard area (about 10 kilometres to the southeast of the Sangin district centre) been one of the most insecure in the district. In Malmard area, the mostly Ishaqzai population, marginalised early on after 2001, have been belligerently anti-government since.

The main road connecting Sangin with the southern areas of Helmand is now the dividing line between the Taleban and the ANSF forces. On the road, between the areas of Haji Fateh Muhammad to Shakar Shela in northeastern Sangin, there are ANA checkpoints. These checkpoints are mostly on the desert side to the west and are therefore more difficult to attack undetected. On the other side of the road, to the east, the Taleban control the villages.

While strategic in a sense that taking Sangin would create a connection to southern Helmand, for the Taleban it has more of a symbolic value, as it is one of the districts where foreign forces lost a lot of lives. While the Taleban already have large parts of the district under their control, they want to push government forces out the rest and add Sangin to 'their' districts. This would provide them with much more coherent territory, which might be easier to hold. Sangin's opium harvest could also be taxed and control taken over

other aspects of the drug trade.

Other areas in central and southern Helmand

Nawa is very populous and green in terms of orchards and fields – they can provide cover for Taleban fighters, especially as the spring and summer seasons are approaching. As the area is densely populated, the ANSF also finds it difficult to use air support or heavy artillery to recapture the areas already under Taleban control and keep the remainder of the district under their control.

At the moment, the Taleban are mainly focusing on consolidating their grip on the districts in the centre of Helmand, in particular those needed to launch a possible attack on Lashkargah.

Further south there is Gramsir, which presents an easier terrain for manoeuvre for the ANSF when compared to Nadali, Marja and Nawa. It is a flat, desert district, without a sizable population, presenting few places for insurgents to hide. According to a recent [New York Times article](#) focusing on the district, Gramsir is peaceful and government-controlled; it seems the huge benefits of the drug trade accruing to local officials there means the Taleban know they would face fierce resistance if they attacked. On the other hand, southern [Dishu has been in the hands of the Taleban since early 2015](#). The district of Khanashin, north of Dishu district in the southwest of Helmand province, was [reclaimed](#) from the Taleban in the second half of December 2015.

Lashkargah under siege

When the Taleban took control of most of Gereshk and parts of Nadali, they also partly surrounded Lashkargah, the provincial capital of Helmand. With Babaji, they actually already have a foot in the city, as it is part of Lashkargah's fourth *nahiya* (precinct), in other words, a suburb. According to reporting from locals, the residents of the provincial capital are able to [hear the fighting in Babaji](#) at night. So far, though, the government holds Lashkargah, which means supply routes between it and Kandahar are still open. Local interviewees have commented that, as long as the Kandahar-Lashkargah road is open and there is an 'escape route', residents will still be willing to stay put. However, their concerns are mounting. While many families from the districts around Lashkargah have moved into the city to take refuge from fighting, so far, few families have left Helmand completely, although some have parts of their extended families to live with relatives in Kandahar as a pre-caution. People still believe, or more accurately hope, that the government will not let Lashkargah fall into the hand of Taleban.

The Taleban's extensive control over central Helmand has not only given them freedom of movement – although the recent redeployment of American and a handful of British forces might limit this to some extent – but also opened up supply routes for them to and from Pakistan. The main route connects the Taleban in northern Helmand with the Band-e Timur area of Maywand in Kandahar province and then south to Pakistan. (The specific route from Maywand district of Kandahar into northern Helmand would be as follows: from Maywand to Khoshkawa of Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, crossing the Helmand River, then to Malgir area, to Shroaw Dasht (still in Gereshk) and then on to Musa Qala, Nowzad, Kajaki or Baghran.)

What has saved Lashkargah from falling so far is that the ANSF are still able to hold crucial parts of Nadali and Nawa. However, the increased recent fighting in Nadali is already an indication that the Taliban are trying to extend their influence to this area as well. If Nadali fell, it would be difficult for Nawa to withstand a strong Taliban attack, even though the local Barakzai tribe is pro-government and had additional police forces sent to defend it in November 2015.

For the government, Lashkargah's Achilles' heel remains its supply route. The road connecting Lashkargar to the ring road at Gereshk is the only major lifeline for the provincial capital. If the Taliban were able to cut off the ring road or just the road connecting it to Lashkargah, this could seal the fate for the provincial capital. Furthermore, the ring road is also used to supply the Shorabak Airbase (the old Camp Bastion), where the 215 Maywand Corps is stationed. However, one needs to consider that taking all of Gereshk, in particular the main roads would be difficult as these areas are flat, with little cover, so that Taliban would have to make themselves visible and vulnerable to air attacks if they were to launch any sort of strong ground attack.

Conclusion: Summary of the main points

- The drug economy in Helmand continues to be a basic driver of conflict.
- The harsh and exclusionary way provincial elites governed after 2001 stoked resentment among parts of the population, helping the Taliban re-emerge in the mid-2000s. That re-emergence coincided with the removal of those elites, which created a power vacuum and helped the insurgency gather strength.
- The Afghan government, the British and, later, during the surge, US forces attempted to clear areas of Helmand from the Taliban. In part, this was done by establishing 'community defence mechanisms' – militias in the early days and later ALP. The Taliban were pushed back during the US surge, but retained a presence in the north of the province, including Baghran, most of Kajaki and Musa Qala.
- In the wake of the withdrawal of international forces in late 2014, the Taliban have managed to advance into northern and central Helmand.
- With the Taliban sending in new commando-like *qet'as*, local ALP forces and the ANSF have crumbled in many places. The government saw several severe setbacks and losses of districts in the second half of 2015.
- The lack of coordination between the various ANSF, ALP and those in charge of the 'chiefdoms', ill-fated strategic decisions to re-deploy successful local ALP commanders to other areas and a weak ANA corps has undermined the defence.
- With the 'strategic retreat' of ANSF troops from Musa Qala and Nowzad on 21 February 2016 and the loss of the suburb of Babaji of Lashkargah to the Taliban in October 2015, the situation on the ground for Afghan government forces became problematic, even with the deployment of fresh foreign forces supporting them.

- In the meantime, the Taliban have been able to hold and even expand their level of control in various districts across Helmand, aided by the effective use of the *qet'as* and of weapons, ammunition and equipment looted from captured ANSF bases. Land and drug trade taxation in areas under their control has ensured full coffers.
- As of March 2016, the stakes are high both for the ANSF and the Taliban: the Taliban, especially its *qet'as*, are vulnerable to the increased international military presence and an increased government focus on Helmand in terms of troops and resources.
- The insurgency needs to be able to advance in Nawa and Nadali if it is to have an opportunity to make a decisive strike against Lashkargah. The ANSF, however, having retreated from Musa Qala and Nowzad, need to focus on securing central Helmand in order to not lose Lashkargah. While international forces might bolster the ANSF in the short-term, the questions will be whether they will coordinate effectively with the ANSF to leverage their mutual strength, whether the ANA will coordinate with the ALP and ANP, and whether remaining ALP commanders can remain strong in their areas. There is also the question of whether the 215 Maiwand corps, now under new leadership, can actually be revived so it becomes a decent fighting force. The political will of the government to ensure that the ANSF can push back in Helmand, even at a high cost, will also be a key factor to watch.

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(1) The geography of Sangin district has also contributed to its never having been fully controlled by the government. It is surrounded by three districts of Helmand province and Ghorak district of Kandahar province (which had also been under Taliban control for many years and which [the Taliban said it had retaken again in 2015](#)). Sangin borders the Zamindawar area of Kajaki, which has also never been fully cleared of Taliban. In addition, fighters from Kajaki were mostly fighting in Sangin, because there has been little fighting in Kajaki district – because Zamindawar has only one major fighting front, the district centre of Kajaki. Therefore, Taliban fighters from Kajaki cross – with ease – into Sarwan Qala of Sangin to support the local Taliban there. To the south, Sangin also borders the two most insecure areas of Gereshk district, Qala-ye Gaz and Mirmandaw area. These are strongholds for the Taliban and local Taliban from there can also easily come and attack Sangin district centre.

(2) Local interviewees told AAN that, in Sangin, even those fighting for or supporting the government have never actually received the support they needed, not only in terms of financial support, but also extra troops. Sometimes, they said, the Taliban would outnumber the security forces, but there were no reinforcements for days, or even weeks. People said they felt abandoned by the central and provincial

government.

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