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War & Peace



Helmand (1): A crisis a long time coming

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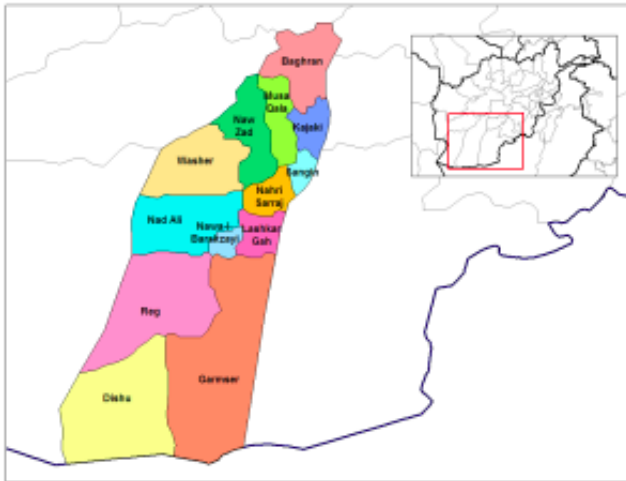


Zamindawar, Kajaki district. Taliban were never eliminated during the US 'surge' from this and other areas of northern Helmand: later, they would use them as a launchpad to re-emerge. (Photo Credit: Rahmatullah Amiri, August 2013)

The rapid fall of entire areas of Helmand to the Taliban during the second half of 2015 and early 2016 has left the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) scrambling to hold the line and try to push back, and led to international forces deploying troops to the province. Guest author Rahmatullah Amiri* brings a special two-part look at Helmand. In part 1, he maps out which areas government and Taliban forces are holding, before looking at the background to the crisis, mapping out the demographics and economies of the districts and key players in the province. In this dispatch, he takes the Helmand story to the end of 2014 and the handover of security to Afghan forces, assessing the impact of predatory elites, British deployment, the United State's surge aimed at 'degrading' the Taliban, and the creation of Afghan Local Police (ALP).

In AAN's [second dispatch](#) on Helmand, Rahmatullah Amiri will track how and why areas and districts have fallen to the Taliban. He will assess a new Taliban military tactic – the use of commando-like units called qet'a – and look at some disastrous tactics on the government's side and its eventual return to an old strategy – setting up new 'community defence forces' in the small chiefdoms.

Control over the districts in Helmand is currently as follows, moving from north to south:



Schematic map of Helmand's districts (Marja is still part of Nadali) (Source: Wikipedia) – Click on the map to enlarge

- **Baghlan** in the far north is completely under Taliban control and has been so for the past ten years;
- Only small parts of **Musa Qala** are under government control. Although, on 26 August 2015, it was captured entirely by the Taliban, the ANSF was able to take some areas back in December 2015. The district centre has been [under Taliban control](#) since 20 February 2016 when ANSF withdrew from it;
- In **Kajaki** in the northeast, only the district centre and the dam located close to the district centre are still somewhat under the control of the ANSF; their elevated location has made it difficult for the Taliban to gain ground in the area, despite many attempts.
- **Nowzad** in the northwest is completely under Taliban control. The government did control the district centre (1) until 20 February when [ANSF forces withdrew from the district](#) completely;
- The district centre of **Washir** in the northwest is still somewhat under government control as well as parts of the ring road crossing the district. The ANSF is able to control this part of the ring road (as well as its connection to the district centre) during the day, but at night, the Taliban are mostly in control of the area;
- Only some parts of **Sangin** district are under government control. The areas to the north, northeast and west of the district centre are held by the Taliban control. While the district centre and the bazaar area are still held by the government, they are highly contested. Recent clearance operations around the Sangin part of the ring road have, at least for now, marginally improved access to the district centre.

- **Nadali** in central western Helmand is about 80 per cent under government control;
- In **Gereshk**, also known as Nahr-e Seraj district, in central Helmand, government control is limited to some parts of the district, including the district centre, the ring road, the bazaar and the main ANA base. (Read an earlier AAN analysis of the area [here](#)). Some of the remaining areas are loosely under Taleban control and are being used to stage operations. Some areas, which have little value for the Taleban or the government, are not controlled by either side. [Troops withdrawn from Musa Qala](#) have been ordered to reinforce Gereshk. This month (March 2016), the Taleban have made progress in controlling the Baloch area in southern Gereshk, which is only about four kilometres from the provincial capital;
- Parts of **Marja**, in central Helmand, are under government control, most notably the district centre and areas around it. The Taleban are in control of the southern areas of the district, but are also operating in many of the remaining areas of the district, especially those close to Nadali. Overall, this district remains highly contested in many areas, with the Taleban attempting to wear down the ANSF, without holding fixed positions themselves.
- In **Nawa** (also known as Nawa-ye Barakzai), also in central Helmand, the government controls the majority of the district. The Taleban are mostly in control of the southern areas along the border with Marja, but have also been attacking check posts in other areas. The strong ANP and ALP presence, along with little support for the Taleban from the local population, has made it difficult for the insurgents to gain more control of this district.
- **Lashkargah**, comprising the city, which is also the provincial capital, as well as surrounding rural areas, is still more or less controlled by the government. A notable exception is the Babaji suburb in the north of Lashkargah in the direction of Gereshk, which [was taken by the Taleban](#) on 20 October 2015. It has since become heavily contested in recent weeks;
- The southeast – comprising **Gramsir** district – is mostly under government control;
- In the southwest of Helmand, only the district centre of **Khaneshin**, also known as Reg, is under government control, while **Dishu** district is completely under Taleban control, except for the check posts along the border with Pakistan.

An overview

The continuous fighting in Helmand has taken a significant toll on the ANSF. Hundreds of casualties, among them [one high ranking ANSF commander](#) and [several international troops](#), have been reported, as well as significant losses also from soldiers deserting their posts or [surrendering to the Taleban](#). Losses to the Taleban are unknown.

Just over one year after security for the province was handed over by ISAF to the Afghan government and the [last British troops left Helmand](#), US and British special forces were [again deployed there](#) (10 British and several hundred American troops). The media have read it as a significant move: “It will be the

largest deployment of American troops outside major bases in Afghanistan since the end of the NATO combat mission in 2014,” reported [The New York Times](#). Resolute Support spokesman US Army Colonel Michael Lawhorn did not want to discuss whether troop numbers were up or down; for security reasons, he said “specific troop levels cannot be discussed.” He said the deployment was part of “a regularly scheduled rotation to replace another unit” and that “RS [Resolute Support] are conducting a train/advice/assist mission in Helmand, just as throughout Afghanistan.” However, US forces, which can take a combat role under the US military’s counter-terrorism mission, Freedom’s Sentinel, have found themselves increasingly drawn into combat in Helmand as ANSF forces have crumbled. There have been air strikes and US Special Operations Forces on the ground, in support of the ANSF. The deployment of several hundred foreign forces, however, cannot turn the clock back: the fight in Helmand is now almost completely Afghan versus Afghan.

Underlining the seriousness of the situation for the ANSF, Kabul has [replaced several leading ANA commanders](#). The Afghan army’s 215 Maiwand Corps had been found to be very short on men – possibly only 40 per cent of their stated number (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Its problems went even deeper than ‘just’ ghost soldiers. US Army Brigadier General Wilson Shoffner, head of public affairs for the U.S.-NATO mission has [spoken](#) of “a combination of incompetence, corruption and ineffectiveness.” AAN was also told that some soldiers in the ANA had been deployed to Helmand for *eight* years: it is a place that the better connected in the army are keen to avoid. Shoffner said the corps commander had been replaced, along with “some brigade commanders and some key corps staff up to full colonel level.” Abdul Jabbar Qahraman was [appointed](#) as ‘operational commander’ of all Afghan forces in Helmand on 27 January 2016.

Afghan national police have also been fighting on the multiple frontlines in the province – and, less well-equipped and more exposed as they often stay at checkpoints, rather than being in their barracks when not fighting – have been taking higher casualties than the army. General Abdul Rahman Sarjang, the Helmand provincial police chief, [told](#) the Associated Press the Afghan security forces were “exhausted” and in dire need of reinforcements, and that a lack of coordination between the army and police was hampering their ability to fight.

At the same time, an increasingly better equipped Taliban have been stepping up their game. The capture of a dozen or more check posts and bases belonging to the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), as well as Afghan Local Police (ALP) strongholds in the last six months has also meant the capture of significant amounts of weapons, ammunition and other equipment, including an estimated 50 to 100 US-made armoured ‘Humvee’ vehicles. The Taliban are [reportedly](#) using them in their current operations.

Before looking at the background at to how this crisis emerged in more detail, we thought it useful to have some information on the demographics, geography and economies of Helmand’s districts.

Short districts profiles

Helmand’s northernmost districts – Baghran, Kajaki and Musa Qala – share similar demographics. 98 per cent of their population belongs to one tribe, the Alizai. The populations of Marja and Nadali further south,

however, consist of a mix of tribes, including Nurzai, Ishaqzai, Alizai, Alekozai and several other smaller ones. The mix is the result of a large-scale irrigation and agriculture project of the 1940-70s, mainly funded by USAID, the Helmand and Arghandab Valley Authority (HAVA), which created new arable land to which Pashtuns from other regions of the country were brought and settled on. (2)

From a strategic point of view, Musa Qala, with its relatively large population and large bazaar, is the heart of northern Helmand. It is one of the major hubs of the opium trade with the harvest from Baghran and Kajaki sold there. The Musa Qala bazaar is one of the biggest drug markets nationwide and attracts key drug traders and smugglers. Many of the main leaders in northern Helmand for the last forty years have come from Musa Qala, in particular, from the Alizai tribe. They include the Akhundzada family who controlled the bazaar before the Taleban and again, after 2001.

Sangin, which borders Musa Qala to the southeast, is the other large centre for drug trade and smuggling. This place has been home to the majority of drug traders and smugglers dealing with the harvest of the farmers from Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces. From Sangin, the harvest would be taken to Iran and Pakistan. This practice continued during the Taleban government and also after 2001. Since the insurgency began, this district has been of strategic importance for the Taleban, not only because of drug smuggling routes, but also because it is considered a crucial part of a corridor connecting the Alizai dominated districts in the north with the rest of the province. The road connecting the Kajaki Dam in the north and the provincial capital Lashkargah in the south also runs through Sangin. Furthermore, it has a significant population of Ishaqzai, who are considered one of the most religiously conservative tribes across Afghanistan. (The new Taleban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur belongs to it.) During the Taleban era, the Ishaqzai tribe was mostly in control of Sangin, but post-2001, the Alekozai, the other large tribe in the district, have dominated again.

Nowzad is also home to a large Ishaqzai population, making up almost 50 per cent of the entire district's inhabitants. It borders Farah province to the west and Washer district of Helmand to the north, which, together with its isolated location and lack of security force presence has made it an ideal transit point for drug smugglers for the past 10 years.

Kajaki has a relatively small population compared to most other districts in the province. However, it is strategically and economically important because of its hydro-electric power station, which was built in the 1950s with US support as part of the HAVA project (see a short history [here](#)). Since 2004, the Taleban have had a strong grip on the Zamindawar area north of Helmand River, which covers approximately 90 per cent of the district. This area has been used as a launching pad for operations south of the river, which comprises the small area held by the government, which includes the district centre as well as the Kajaki dam. (3)

Gereshk district is the second most populated area in Helmand after Lashkargah, and its district centre is the second biggest city after the provincial capital. Gereshk is in a highly strategic location; it connects northern and central Helmand and is also on the main route through Helmand in the east-west direction. The ring road passes through this district, coming from Kandahar in the east and passing on to Herat in the northwest. Whoever controls this district, and this part of the ring road, controls the trade route between Kandahar and Herat.

Unlike most other districts in the province, Marja, together with Nadali (which it used to be part of) is mostly inhabited by *naqileen*, Pashtun migrants who settled in the area from other parts of Afghanistan after the Kajaki dam project was built. Maintaining security in Marja has special significance due to its proximity to Lashkargah. However, it also became iconic when, in February 2010, it was selected by the US military to become a 'poster boy' for counter-insurgency and the surge (the deployment of tens of thousands of extra US soldiers sent to defeat the Taleban). After US soldiers seized Marja, it was to become a model of good governance. Currently, only small parts of the district are under government control.

The roots of the crisis

Like almost everywhere in Afghanistan, a brief look at past events is crucial to understanding why the current situation looks as it does.

Helmand after the fall of the Taleban government

As in neighbouring Kandahar and indeed, most of the rest of the country, Helmand saw a return to local strongmen rule after the collapse of the Taleban regime in 2001. Some of those strongmen had earlier ruled the area, commanding mujahedin fronts during the fight against the Soviet occupation (1979-89), while others were relative newcomers. Their apologists claim they had led the 'resistance' to the Taleban. In reality, none was present in Helmand at the time of the fall of the Taleban, but rather drove across the border from Pakistan once the Taleban had gone. Then the mujahedin commanders and prominent elders with roots in the province split up Helmand amongst themselves. In the days after the installation of the new government in Kabul in late 2001, the strongmen went to the capital to lobby the newly appointed Hamid Karzai and then returned with appointment letters.

The four strongest among them, who were also from the four most important tribes in the province, divided the key posts – governor, police chief, army chief and NDS boss – among themselves, as well as control over the various districts of the province. This included control over patronage and associated resources, most notably the drug trade, but also 'local security,' meaning areas where militiamen employed by each of the powerbrokers had control. This provincial balance of power lasted until about 2005.

The four strongmen were: Abdul Rahman Jan, a Nurzai from Marja who became the province's police chief, Dad Muhammad (better known as Amer Dado), an Alekozai from Sangin district, who became head of NDS, Ma'alem Mir Wali, a Barakzai from Gereshk who became the commander of the local army division and, most importantly, Sher Muhammad Akhundzada from the Alizai tribe, subtribe Hasanzai, who got the provincial governorship. (4)

Sher Muhammad's father, Muhammad Rasul Akhundzada, had been the patriarch of the Akhundzadas. Before his assassination in 1990, he had been the single strongest mujahedin commander in Helmand, fighting with Harakat-e Inqilab-e Islami. Under his reign, Helmand became the most prolific poppy growing area on earth. Another son, Amir Muhammad Akhundzada, was 'appointed' district governor for Musa Qala, the family's old heartland and opium trading hub, in 2001 (he became deputy governor of Helmand in 2006).

In contrast, post-2001 police chief Abdul Rahman Jan emerged as a strongman without a prominent family background. A Nurzai originally from Nowzad, he gained prominence in Helmand as a commander of a tribal militia recruited from his Nurzai tribe during the mujahedin government of the mid-1990s (first fighting for Jamiat-e Islami and later switching to another faction). After the Taleban lost power in Helmand in 2001, local militias and their commanders tried to divide up the areas of control – Abdul Rahman Jan was [able to claim Marja](#) (then still the district capital area of Nadali).

Ma'alem Mir Wali, a Barakzai from Gereshk, started out as a student at Kandahar University before joining Hezb-e Islami, when the Soviets invaded, and becoming one of its main commanders in Helmand. After briefly joining Najibullah's National Reconciliation Program, he returned to Hezb-e Islami in 1992 and was the provincial governor of Helmand until 1993. When Lashkargah fell to the Taleban, he had to flee the province and fell in with the patronage network of Ahmad Shah Massud. After his return post-2001, he became commander of the 93rd Division, which was dismantled in 2003 – with some of the militias that were part of that division joining the then re-emerging Taleban.

Amer Dado, an Alekozai from Sangin district affiliated with Jamiat-e Islami, became the head of NDS in Helmand after the fall of the Taleban. His brother Juma Gul was appointed Chief of Police of Sangin.

Allegations of abuses by these strongmen were legion and included illegal arrests and torture, all aggravated by the marginalization of 'out' tribes who saw their poppy crops selectively eradicated and government ranks packed out by their rivals. "Karzai's cronies were antagonising many communities," wrote Antonio Giustozzi. (5) "People were driven into the arms of the Taleban. The insurgents did not have to do much, except approach the victims of the pro-Karzai strongmen and promise them protection and support." Fundamental to much of the violence also was – and still is – the drug economy. Its importance is "hard to overstate," wrote Tom Cogan, "as a driver for rampant corruption, instability, and violent competition within Helmand Province and the south as a whole." (6)

All three of the remaining four strongmen lost their posts ahead of the British deployment in 2006, part of Phase 3 of ISAF expansion. The UK had made 'cleaning up' the leaders of the provincial administration a precondition of their deployment because of the allegations of their involvement in the drug trade and other wrongdoings. President Karzai gave in to these demands, albeit only very reluctantly, particularly to losing Akhundzada whom he considered a key ally (he was only finally removed after nine tons of opium were discovered in his office). After this removal from the post of provincial governor, Karzai appointed him a senator and made his younger brother Amir Muhammad the deputy governor of the province. However, Sher Muhammad's move to Kabul resulted in the family losing a lot of their control in Helmand. He reacted recklessly to his demotion, reportedly [sending about 3000 of his men over to the Taleban](#). Amer Dado and Mir Wali both became MPs in the 2005 elections. Amer Dado was killed in an IED attack in 2009.

Changing tides – the British deployment and the US surge

The British did not realise when they deployed to Helmand in 2006 that they were taking over a province where trouble had long been brewing. Removing the strongmen also eliminated the source of much of the resentment, which was driving the province towards insurgency, but also the means of containing it. Until Sher Muhammad's removal, the security in the province had mostly been based on agreements with the

various local militia commanders and their men.

Once the British had taken full command over Helmand in March 2007, the security situation started to unwind rapidly. Militia commanders – allies of the former governor – stayed at home. The newly arrived British troops were unable to fill the power vacuum, which opened up opportunities for the Taliban to start testing the British by launching attacks in various districts. Often they found [little resistance](#).

In fact, the Taliban had already slowly started bolstering their position before the British arrived. In early 2006, the Taliban solidified their control of the northernmost district of the province, Baghran, where they had remained unbothered since 2004 and launched a series of offensives on Musa Qala district centre throughout the summer 2006. This [siege of Musa Qala](#) ended on 13 October 2006 with a deal that ceded the district to the Taliban and allowed the besieged foreign troops to evacuate the area. (7)

The new provincial governor, Muhammad Daud, fearing these initial attacks were a sign of more to come, immediately requested that the foreign forces spread out across the districts under threat. With Karzai's backing, he proposed that the troops should engage the Taliban in Nowzad, Sangin, Musa Qala and Kajaki. These demands were partially met, but despite [an increase in British troops](#) from 3,300 to 7,000 in 2007, they soon proved overstretched (as [repeatedly lamented](#) in the British press, unable to contain the Taliban's slow but steady progress.)

In order to stem the Taliban tide, a US battalion was transferred to Helmand in spring 2008. Within one year, another 11,000 US troops had come to Helmand as part of the surge, President Obama's attempt to smash or at least 'decapitate' and weaken the insurgency before the withdrawal already scheduled for the end of 2014. Those troops represented more than half of the overall 21,000 surge troops, indicating how important a focus Helmand was in the Afghanistan-wide fight. Surge troops were also involved in a new strategy of 'kill/capture', where insurgent leaders were targeted for assassination or detention (see AAN assessments of this strategy [here](#) and [here](#)).

The increased presence of US and British forces, as well as of Afghan National Police (ANP), was used to launch a series of large-scale operations to secure the province ahead of the presidential election in the summer of 2009. As a result, the Taliban were pushed back from many areas, most notably from Marja (some of these areas were later re-taken by the Taliban, including parts of Marja). Given its relatively central location and its population of *naqelin*, the town was not at the centre of Helmand's tribal politics or one of the major strongholds of the Taliban. In 2012, many Taliban commanders in Helmand who had gone to Pakistan for the winter, decided to not even come for the summer 'fighting season' because of the risk of being killed or captured by international or Afghan government forces.

Alternative approaches to reducing the conflict in Sangin by local people (and involving the British to some extent), failed, largely because of US suspicions and intent to pursue a 'kinetic' approach to the insurgency. As AAN reported (for a detailed look at this, see [here](#)), ISAF "repeatedly squandered the chance to build a durable political settlement in the district, including bombing a meeting of Taliban [in 2010] while they were discussing going over to the government" and the US's detention of a key religious figure in 2011 who had also been trying to persuade Taliban to come over. The 'what might have beens' following on from a political settlement in Sangin, one of the most difficult and significant districts in

Helmand, are many.

As it was, the last and most significant push north of the surge was made into Musa Qala where the Taliban still controlled small parts of the district, mostly desert. Baghran district, and the Zamindawar area of Kajaki remained beyond the reach of the surge. It could be judged that the Taliban were cornered in these areas – or that they provided a safe haven for displaced Taliban and enabled their rise after the surge troops left. While the surge had succeeded in securing the western part of central Helmand, it had done little to eliminate the Taliban from the far north of the province.

New approaches to local security: the chieftdoms

Apart from fighting and pushing back the Taliban, the surge also brought a new approach to local security – the US military, especially Special Operations Forces, focussed on setting up small units of ALP or supporting local militias in areas perceived to be most vulnerable to Taliban attacks. In the areas from where Taliban had recently been ousted, a variety of young ANP and ALP commanders established patchworks of small chieftdoms – controlling small pockets of populations, often only at *manteqa* level (a small area within a district, usually within a valley, along a major irrigation canal or encompassing a particular ethnic group, tribe or sub-tribe). Those commanders were tasked with recruiting and leading fighters in local communities against the Taliban.

These chieftdoms were like dots along a line – from Musa Qala in the north to Gereshk on the ring road and onwards to Marja – and formed a more or less continuous corridor of territory that was mostly under pro-government forces' control. In effect, they created a barrier to prevent the Taliban from pushing further south. This more systematic setting up and engaging of small local commanders in specific areas signified a final break from the rule of the former strongmen, who no longer had enough control of critical areas for the Afghan government to be able to rely on them.

One example of a significant commander coming to prominence in these years was a man called Abdul Wali – usually known as Kumandan (commander) Koka. He already had a militia background in Musa Qala and had been the district chief of police (2001-2002), before being detained by US forces and spending 14 months in Bagram. Once out, he returned to the fight and by 2006, although on paper only an ordinary policeman was, in effect, the man whom the Taliban had to beat in Musa Qala. Several times that year, they tried to capture the district from him, but failed to do so. In recognition of his fighting ability, in December 2007, he was appointed chief of police of Musa Qala district. Koka, an Alizai like the Akhundzadas, had strong support from local communities due to his ability to fend off the Taliban. At the same time, he also enjoyed political support from the Akhundzadas who made sure he was able to operate as he wanted and was not threatened by local power politics, including attempts to replace him. Sources close to the Taliban interviewed by the author considered Koka a formidable opponent and developed a significant respect for him. They were keen to kill him as they saw him as the primary obstacle to capturing the district. In April 2012, Koka suffered grievous injuries and was no longer able to go onto the battlefield.

Apart from Koka, at least five other commanders emerged in the various districts during the surge years: Hekmatullah, the son of Ma'alem Mir Wali, the Barakzai from Geresh who had become chief of the provincial army division in 2001, (ANP district commander, Gereshk) with his sub-commanders, Abdul Wali

(ANP) and Kamal Aka (ALP); Haji Muhammad Asef (ALP) with his sub-commanders in the various areas of Marja, including Haji Baz Gul, from the Dawtani tribe, a [famous female commander](#), Firoza, also known as Haji Nanai (from Sistani in Marja) and Haji Moto Khan (Nurzai from Sistani area).

Towards the end of the surge and as international 'boots on the ground' support for the ANSF started to draw down, this initially rather solid arrangement began to crumble. Funds started to run out for the economic incentives such as projects, which were meant to keep these areas' populations standing against the Taliban. (8) People also started to slowly realise that the ALP were actually meant to *fight* the Taliban – and often without government troops' back-up. In Marja where the US forces had set up militias between 2010 and 2012, many community members joined because they were poor or for other incentives. (9) When the US forces left, half of the 800 militia members were disarmed, the remaining integrated into the ALP.

The last of the US surge troops left Afghanistan in September 2012 and the US military and ISAF strategy turned to building up the ANSF as they prepared to hand over responsibility for security to Afghan forces. The last British and US troops [left](#) Helmand on 27 October 2014. General Sher Muhammed Karimi, speaking at the handover ceremony, called Helmand "the toughest province in Afghanistan." More than 350 Marines and 400 British troops had been killed in the province, he said, and 700 members of the Afghan forces had already been killed in Helmand that year.

By the end of 2014, the bulk of foreign forces had left Afghanistan. ISAF became RS – Resolute Support – [a strictly non-combat 'train, assist and advise' mission](#). The US kept its options more open, with troops both in Resolute Support and the new US counter-terrorism mission, Freedom's Sentinel (which replaced Enduring Freedom), but its footprint was tiny compared to earlier years (10). Practically speaking, responsibility for security in Helmand and in the country as a whole was in Afghan hands.

The questions now would be: how would the Taliban be able to rebound after the surge, how strong was the Afghan state and its forces after the handover of security, and were the local security structures – the ALP and local militias – prepared to shoulder the bulk of the job of defending the population? These questions will be looked at in part 2 of AAN's special reporting on Helmand "The chain of chiefdoms unravels."

Edited by Lenny Linke, Kate Clark and Thomas Ruttig

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(1) The district centre of Nowzad was moved because it was in a location that made it difficult to defend. The new location of the district centre has been moved closer to Camp Bastian and Lashkargah.

(2) The project was started by the Japanese in the 1930s, although on a much smaller scale, with the restoring and expanding of the old irrigation system around the Boghra Canal. The US efforts are well documented in Mike Martin's *An Intimate War: An Oral History Of The Helmand Conflict 1978-2012* and in

Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Little America*.

(3) Afghan, British and American troops have all tried to regain control over the area but failed to do so. This included, in the summer of 2008, what was described as the biggest British-led 'route clearance operation' since World War II, with nearly 5000 ISAF and Afghan troops trying to transport components for a new turbine to the dam. The mission was touted as a plan to provide an estimated 1.7 million people with electricity, fuel local agriculture and industry. However, mending the turbines was never going to be enough by itself to bring the electricity. The project was a known failure from the start. (See previous AAN dispatch [here](#)).

(4) The Akhundzadas had been ruling Musa Qala, the heart of northern Helmand, since the coup in 1978. They were pushed out by the Taleban in the 1995. The [killing of Akhundzada](#)'s father and a brother in an ambush in Pakistan in 1990 is often attributed to his main rival party in the area, Hezb-e Islami.

(5) Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: the Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, Hurst 2007, p 60.

(6) Tom Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand: An Oral History", in Antonio Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban*, Oxford University Press, 2012 p 149.

(7) The 'Musa Qala agreement' – an attempt by the British to pacify the district, but undermined by the US – was, as described by AAN in [an earlier dispatch](#) "a local peace agreement with the Taleban to stop the fighting (or end the practical siege the British troops were facing in Musa Qala) and open it up for development activities that would also include the Taleban. Such a 'protocol' was proposed and then mediated by Musa Qala tribal elders. This came finally into force on 7 September 2006. It held for 142 days [and broke down] because the British, the provincial and the Kabul government and the Taleban were not the only actors in that area. US troops were also operating in Helmand, and the government in Washington at the time still rejected all political dealings with the Taleban; this only changed at the very end of the Bush administration. There were also opponents of the agreement in the Afghan administration."

(8) The British, Americans and others, both military and civilian, were involved in a variety of projects of all sizes to boost local development and incentivise an economy independent of the poppy cultivation. The most prominent projects were the [Helmand Food Zone](#) and the [upgrade](#) of the Kajaki Dam.

(9) Some of those who joined the ALP later reported they had felt coerced, as a refusal risked making them suspect in the foreigners' eyes as possible Taleban supporters.

(10) There are 13,195 Resolute Support NATO troops deployed in Afghanistan, of which [6,839 are American](#). In total, the US has deployed 9800 troops which would suggest 2761 of those belong to the 'can be combat' Freedom's Sentinel mission. However, some US forces also [appear to switch back and forth between commands](#).

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