

Marjah – Winning the Battle; Losing the War

**By
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We are now witnessing the first act of the increased US troop level in Afghanistan. The scene is Marjah in Helmand Province. There, the US has sent some 10,000 US troops and an even greater number of Afghani troops. The idea is to break the Taliban's control over this remote, dusty village of some 35,000 residents.

Militarily, the US/Kabul assault on Marjah will succeed. However, as in all such wars, the eventual outcome is not determined by military means alone.

Fallujah vs. Marjah

When US troops invaded Fallujah in Iraq (in 2004), they basically declared war on the entire population there. Shortly after the US re-conquered Fallujah, however, resistance to the US occupation increased throughout the region. This was partly motivated by the fury at the US troops for their brutality in dealing with the Fallujans. This time, in Afghanistan, the head of the US forces, General Stanley McChrystal, has explicitly stated that he wants to avoid another Fallujah.

The US's intent to change tactics in Marjah is part of a wider change in strategy. The new regime in Washington recognizes that it cannot simply go around smashing any opposition through brute force alone. Support for the opposition to US capitalism must be at least neutralized, if not largely overcome. What are the chances of success in Marjah and in Helmand Province in general?

“Taliban Recruiting Opportunity”

In part, the answer lies in broader issues. Part of the reason for focusing on Marjah at this time is to undercut the funding that the Taliban receives from the heroin trade; Helmand Province is the largest grower of Poppy in Afghanistan, which supplies something like 90% of the raw material for heroin in the world. So part of the follow-up to this will be a poppy plant eradication program in the fields surrounding Marjah. Linked with this will be the installation of representatives of the Kabul government in Marjah. Bringing in a “government in a box” McChrystal calls it. However, as “Foreign Policy” magazine (Feb. 8, 2010) noted: *“If no alternative livelihoods are created once the district has been re-taken, resentment towards the Afghan government and international forces will only increase.”* But the alternatives must be provided by the Karzai regime and their representatives in the province. Given that this is one of the world's most corrupt regimes, the chances of this money actually reaching those who need it are very slim indeed.

The build-up to this assault provides additional evidence. In the weeks prior to the assault, thousands of Marjah residents fled, many of them to refugee camps in Lashkar Ga. The same issue of “Foreign Policy” described the situation in this “ungoverned refugee camp”: *“This camp does not have sufficient food, medical supplies, or accommodations for the families who have already fled there -- a shocking state of affairs which has persisted since March 2006 -- and is already far beyond any original holding capacity, full of unemployed and angry men unable to provide for their families”* It called the camp a “Taliban recruitment opportunity.” This recruitment opportunity will be mirrored in and around Marjah as the residents see a principle source of income – opium poppies – destroyed and no adequate alternative provided.

That the US tiger has not changed its stripes can be seen from the air assault on the border between Uruzgan and Daykundi provinces on February 22. There, US Special Operations forces strafed and bombed a mini-bus caravan, killing 27 civilians. These Special Operations forces are the most brutal and crude of all. They are trained to simply go in, shoot or take prisoners and get

out, giving no consideration to the “rules of war”. Their original main commander was none other than Stanley McChrystal, the same McChrystal who is now so careful in Marjah. He was reportedly furious over this atrocity, but his problem is that his entire method has been geared to produce exactly these results. He cannot so easily retrain his troops.

Then there is the question of why Marjah for the first major assault of the increased US troops there in the first place? As Fawza Kufti, a member of the Afghan parliament put it, "I don't think this district is strategically very important for bringing peace and security to the whole country. The Taliban are very scattered, it's not an organized war. It's not going to work with such a massive military operation." But that is part of the very reason: Given its small size and relative isolation, the US forces can score a relatively easy propaganda victory by overrunning the town with few casualties. In addition, Marjah is near or close to the proposed route for the Unocal-proposed natural gas pipeline that would run from the Caspian Sea to Karachi.

Conclusion

The US strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan is still aimed at world domination. In the course of this drive, it has faced defeats and stalemates, not only militarily. This includes the rise of rivals such as Chinese capitalism. Given this rise, and given the support they are gaining even in the US's back yard (Latin America), and given a degree of doubt and criticism within the European Union, and given the rising resistance of the working class, especially in Latin America, the US regime has had to shift its tactics. This symptom of weakness is revealed in their taking into account the degree of suffering that the civilian population undergoes (Fallujah vs. Marjah). Their weakness is also revealed in the possible shift to a much more limited goal – from complete domination of an entire nation to control of simply the strategically more important regions.

One of their main sources of weakness lies in their allies – puppet regimes – they are forced to accept in countries like Afghanistan. For a variety of reasons, these allies are invariably the most reactionary and corrupt layers in those societies. They must operate outside of the control or even the pressure of the workers and peasants. They will never, therefore, be able to build modern, stable democracies through these elements.

The assault on Marjah may succeed militarily, but the military battles are only a secondary factor in winning a war; the primary factor is usually political. Given the reactionary nature of their present opponents (such as the Taliban), they may have limited success in the short term. However, they cannot crush entire populations nor can they prevent the increased influence of their rivals. Try as they might, even with all their tactical twists and turns, their domination will inevitably weaken. Meanwhile, the economic crisis of US and world capitalism is driving forward a movement of the US working class. As this movement develops, it will find an adversary – the US capitalist class – beset with one crisis after another.