

**“THE MEANING OF MARJAH: DEVELOPMENTS IN SECURITY AND STABILITY IN
AFGHANISTAN”**

PREPARED STATEMENT OF

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Ladies and Gentlemen: Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee on recent United States and international civil-military activities in the Marjah District of Helmand Province, as well as our broader efforts to support the Afghan government in its efforts to provide expanded governance and improved socio-economic opportunities across southern Afghanistan. I’m pleased to be here today with Brigadier General Mick Nicholson from the U.S. Army, who has been a superb partner for both our civilian team in the South and also for our Afghan partners.

THE CIVILIAN UPLIFT

In March 2009, President Obama announced our intent to expand greatly the number of U.S. civilian experts working in Afghanistan, and especially the number of USG civilians deployed outside of Kabul. The President highlighted this increased presence when he announced an additional 30,000 troops for Afghanistan in December 2009, and Secretary Clinton has emphasized that a robust civilian presence and assistance mission will need to continue well beyond the conclusion of our combat mission.

When I arrived in Kandahar to assume the new position of Senior Civilian Representative for Southern Afghanistan in July 2009, there were a total of eight U.S. civilians serving the six provinces that constitute Regional Command-South (RC/S). That number has grown steadily and we now have over one hundred U.S. civilian officers from the State Department, USAID and the U.S. Department of Agriculture serving at the RC/S headquarters as well as in four international Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and 12 newly formed District Support Teams (DSTs). We very much appreciate the support of Congress in enabling us to better address the huge needs in RC-S with greater human and financial resources.

The State, USAID and USDA representatives at our PRTs and DSTs actively engage with the Afghan provincial and district governments, offering them support and working in tandem to develop Afghan government capacity and implement development projects crucial to the success of our overall military mission. These officers operate in the most challenging of circumstances.

The DSTs are a critical innovation to extend the reach of the Afghan government to the grassroots, which is key to General McChrystal's counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy. DSTs typically consist of one State, one USAID, and one USDA representative. Their working and living conditions vary from district to district, but their primary role is to engage with the district government on a close basis. In fact, they frequently live at or within the district government compound. Working in partnership with district government leadership, U.S. military counterparts, and Afghan security forces, the DST supports activities such as creating workable district development plans and forming representative community councils. They seek to strengthen the district government's links with provincial authorities to ensure the needs of the district are conveyed and that appropriate ministries in Kabul address their needs, always with transition ultimately in mind. In areas and districts where the Afghan government has recently asserted greater authority, DSTs, in partnership with ISAF, become the backbone in support of Afghan governance.

U.S. civilians have a very close working relationship with ISAF at all levels. However, they fall under the Chief of Mission authority of Ambassador Eikenberry and their activities are directed

and coordinate by me and my interagency team co-located with the RC-South military headquarters at Kandahar. In the South, I am the partner of the RC/S Commander, UK Major General Nick Carter.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HELMAND AND MARJAH

Recent civ-mil operations in Marjah are part of the wider Operation Moshtarak, which in Dari means “together.” Operations include not only Marjah, but the larger Nad-e-Ali district. These operations are an example of the expanded U.S. civilian presence that, working with our Afghan and ISAF partners, seeks to extend Afghan governance authority across the South. In the past year, we conducted similar stability operations in Arghandab, Nawa, and Garmsir. So, why Marjah, and why now?

From a counter-insurgency perspective, the Helmand River Valley is key to securing the population of southern Afghanistan. Over 75 percent of the population of Helmand resides in the districts between Gereshk and Garmsir on the Helmand River; Marjah is a key district in this area of approximately 100 square miles with an estimated population of 40 -50 thousand in the new Marjah district boundaries. U.S. Marines and British forces cleared much of central Helmand in the summer of 2009, but Marjah and parts of Nad-e-Ali district remained under Taliban control. The Taliban view Helmand as a key province to control and to use as a supply route for its activities throughout the south and further north. In recent years, Helmand has been Afghanistan’s most violent province and has produced by far the most narcotics, but it is also the province with the largest percentage of arable land and is among the most populated. Strategically, Helmand is also critically linked to the development and security of neighboring Kandahar province. For decades, the U.S. has had significant interests in working with the Afghan government to develop and build capacity in Helmand, including in the 1950s building the irrigation system that created many Helmand population centers, including Marjah.

Marjah was under direct Taliban and narco-baron control from 2008 until the Afghan government reasserted its authority with international support in February 2010. Marjah has been a staging ground for attacks on government-controlled areas, including a number of attacks

on the provincial capital Lashkar Gah less than twenty miles away. The town was also producing a great proportion of the IEDs used against Afghan and international forces in Helmand. With its richly irrigated farmland, Marjah was also Helmand's primary poppy growing district. Marjah was thus not only one of the last Taliban strongholds in central Helmand but through illicit crop taxation, a productive financial source for insurgents.

The operation in Marjah also had important effects for Nawa, another key district in Helmand, adjacent to Marjah. Throughout late 2009 and early 2010, Nawa district leaders and citizens were wary of the negative influence from their neighbor. Within a month of the formation of the Nawa community council in October 2009, Taliban taking refuge in Marjah assassinated three members, including the chairman. After these killings, the community council took several months to rebound to a point where members felt safe enough to represent their villages openly. Additionally, Taliban control of Marjah restricted Nawa residents' freedom of movement as they were scared to travel on roads when the enemy could attack them and then easily retreat to Marjah. As Marjah's security expands, Nawa's security, governance, and economic growth will also progress, as will the conditions in neighboring Nad-e-Ali and the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, total population of around one half million.

A NEW LEVEL OF PARTNERSHIP WITH AFGHANS

Operation Moshtarak to clear Marjah and Nad-e-Ali districts represented a new level of partnership between the Afghan government and the international community to plan and implement a fully integrated civilian-military clearance and stabilization operation, with Helmand Governor Mangal in the lead. Plans were developed in complete consultation with Afghan authorities. And Governor Mangal led a delegation together with his Afghan Security partners – and including Afghan police and army counterparts – to brief President Karzai and his National Security Council in late January. General Carter and I spent many hours with our Afghan counterparts planning this operation to ensure the political context was set, Afghan forces were available and partnered with ISAF forces, and the Governor Mangal-led stabilization plan was in place. The Afghan government also made a concerted effort – through the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) – to develop a District Development Plan

in Nad-e-Ali, including Marjah, to create enhanced local governance capacity. This included filling the staffing patterns of district-level government offices once clearing operations were concluded. Filling these government positions is key to our COIN efforts to extend Afghan governance authority in key districts and has been a significant challenge due to limited Afghan capacity. There are Afghan civil servants qualified to fill positions at the provincial or district level, but most are reluctant to actively occupy positions in recently cleared areas throughout Helmand. Some officials have returned to Nad-e-Ali and Marjah districts, but it will remain an ongoing effort to convince Afghan civil servants to work from these district centers.

Operation Moshtarak proceeded only after receiving final approval of Afghan authorities. On February 11, Minister of Interior Atmar and Governor Mangal convened a well-attended meeting, dubbed a “super shura,” with local elders in Lashkar Gah to discuss Operation Moshtarak and respond to questions and concerns. At President Karzai’s request, Governor Mangal held a follow-up shura on February 12 with a smaller group of key Marjah elders to ensure that all of the operational details were understood. On the evening of February 12, President Karzai authorized the launch of the operation. Hours later, at approximately 0200 on February 13, Afghan and ISAF forces commenced operations.

D-DAY

In the weeks leading up to Operation Moshtarak, State Department and USAID civilians, as well as USAID implementing partners, worked side-by-side with their Afghan and ISAF counterparts to prepare for the launch of the operation. The degree of civilian integration and planning exceeded all previous efforts in Afghanistan. Heeding the advice of RC-South and the U.S. Marines, and acting in coordination with Afghan government authorities, U.S. civilians entered Marjah at D+4 with the District Governor elect to conduct a development survey. Once military forces secured an area near the Marjah village center for a secure forward operating base, U.S. civilians, as well as several Afghan government representatives, moved their operations to Marjah and established residency there. On February 25, the Afghan flag was raised at the Nad-

e-Ali district center. On March 7, President Karzai, accompanied by several ministers, visited Marjah and met with local residents.

MARJAH TODAY

Although still early in the campaign -- less than three months into the hold phase -- conditions in and around Marjah are becoming more secure since the launch of the operation. Freedom of movement is improving for local residents, including commercial movement to and from markets in Lashkar Gah. Residents in some parts of Marjah, however, continue to be intimidated and harassed by insurgents and the levels of violence remain a hindrance to establishing Afghan governance and stability operations.

While still hindered by the lack of security and freedom of movement, the Afghan government presence in Marjah is becoming larger and more active, with the support of U.S. and UK civilians. With the exception of Nad -e-Ali, there are now more permanent civil servants working in Marjah than in any other district in Helmand. District Governor Haji Zahir is reaching out aggressively to elders and communities and is present in the district center, which is currently undergoing refurbishment. The bulk of his immediate staff is in place, including the Chief Executive, Office Director, Sector Director, and District/Village Officer. There are a growing number of line ministry officials working in Marjah on a seconded basis from the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL), the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development (MRRD), the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Health. In addition, there is now a prosecutor, seven National Directorate of Security (NDS) officials, and five Criminal Investigative Division (CID) officials in Marjah. This increase must be tempered against the reality that Afghan governance capacity is limited and even the creation of this level of government is likely to prove a challenge to replicate in other key districts in any short-term time frame.

There are other important, ongoing activities in Marjah: construction of a new government center has begun; roads are under construction; over 2,000 farmers have benefited from the a poppy transition program; and about 4,000 water pumps and agricultural support packages will

be distributed by USAID under the Afghanistan Vouchers for Increased Production in Agriculture (AVIPA) Plus program. Public services such as health, education, water, and dispute settlement are starting to be provided. Students at Luy Cherey Boys High School in Marjah are now going to classes in temporary tents. The classes were moved from the damaged school building to the temporary tents, so that demolition and construction of a new school building can begin at the site. Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are increasingly visible on the streets and bazaars of Marjah and now occupy an ever-increasing number of observation posts at the major intersections. There is also an increasingly level of commercial activity. There is, however, a long way to go.

THE FUTURE OF MARJAH

The governance outlook for Marjah is generally positive. Afghan officials in Kabul are working with the provincial and district governments to provide more support from the central government. They are seeking ways to increase the quantity and quality of Afghan National Police deployed in the district in coordination with the international community and ISAF. Both Governor Mangal and the Marjah District Governor are engaged in an aggressive political outreach campaign to understand community needs that must be addressed and to ensure that residents recognize the government is seeking to address those concerns. Key officials also remain engaged in implementing the District Development Plan, soliciting assistance for all sectors from the central government and international community.

ISAF will continue to work closely with Afghan authorities at all levels. Given that the face of ISAF is often the first seen by residents after a clearing operation, ISAF forces play an important role in ensuring a smooth transition from security operations to civilian-led development operations. The Marines understand this. ISAF forces will continue to work with civilian and Afghan counterparts to achieve maximum results. U.S. civilians, working with their U.K. and Danish counterparts at the Helmand PRT, will continue to support the Marjah DST, currently Afghanistan's largest DST in terms of international money and staff. The PRT will also continue to work with the provincial and district governments on political outreach and to push for greater line ministry representation and delivery for Marjah.

CHALLENGES

Governance can only improve as fast as Afghan authorities can provide properly trained staff with adequate salaries and benefits that will ensure they stay on the job. Security also plays a crucial role in increasing governance capacity. Representatives of some line ministries continue to refuse to stay in Marjah, fearing intimidation and violence, and those officials who do show up to work require greater freedom of movement to become effective service providers.

There is no “one-size fits all” strategy for development and capacity building in districts following ‘clearing’ operations. Nawa and Garmsir districts, for example, followed different, yet largely successful paths. But the one common feature is that of the different phases of counterinsurgency (shape, clear, hold, build, transfer), ‘clear’ is vital but not the decisive phase, it is the ‘shape’ phase and the prospect of what comes in the ‘hold’ phase that is decisive in southern Afghanistan. Likewise, conditions in Marjah are unique in some respects. A ready-made-government concept cannot take into account all the intricacies for proper governance capacity building. Having a district governor in Marjah with a staff within the first 45 days following the launch of the operations was no small feat for rural Afghanistan, but more resources and greater central government support will push the government to better, higher levels. Afghan capacity, however, remains limited.

Although these are real challenges, we expect that efforts by the Afghan government and international community to improve conditions in Marjah will persist. As has happened in some other districts in the South, such as Nawa, Garmsir and Arghandab, solid, measureable progress in Marjah could likely be achieved in the months to come. The key to success at the district level is to tie Afghans to their government and allow local residents to believe in a future without Taliban intimidation. This takes time, resources and persistent security. And great patience.

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