
AFGHANISTAN: THE FALL OF HELMAND

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It was called Operation Moshtarak and it was supposed to be the defining moment of the Afghanistan conflict - an all-out assault by coalition forces on the Taliban-held city of Marjah in Helmand province.

Long regarded as a "festering sore" by senior NATO officers, Marjah was seen as one of the last insurgent-controlled areas in the south of the country, a haven for several hundred fighters and a centre of poppy cultivation and opium production - a major source of Taliban income - and also for the mass manufacture of roadside bombs. Its anarchy and instability posed a growing threat to the regional capital Lashkar Gah, if not the whole of the country, and the time had come to clear it out, the coalition believed.

As the attack got under way in February 2010, the coalition's public relations efforts went into overdrive. Led by the US Marine Corps, a joint force of 15,000 American, British, Canadian, Danish, Afghan National Army (ANA) and other International Assistance Force (ISAF) units, would "clear the area of insurgents and allow forces to work with local institutions to bolster reconstruction and provide support for the rule of law". It epitomised, an array of TV pundits declared, the new "post-surge counterinsurgency" approach of both US President Barack Obama and NATO commander General Stanley McChrystal.

Troops would be working closely with tribal elders to prepare the way for the return of Afghan police. Winning the hearts and minds of the local population was a crucial aim, and even the name of the operation had been carefully chosen to reflect this collaborative effort. Moshtarak, reporters were told, meant "together" in the local Dari language.

And so, by December of that year, after some of the fiercest fighting of the war, the loss of around 60 coalition troops, hundreds wounded and an unknown number of ANA and civilian deaths - with thousands more driven from their homes, terrified by bombing and machine-gun fire and the incessant crack of sniper rounds - the operation was brought to a close. It had been through various intense phases because, of course, the Taliban couldn't be counted on to play ball or go quietly, but eventually, and perhaps inevitably, it was hailed as a military success.

The insurgency had been suppressed, everyone declared. Marjah had been recovered and the rule of law had been re-established.

Flag raising ceremonies had taken place, people could return to their homes, schools and businesses could re-open and ISAF - after demonstrating what western military might and ramped-up Afghan government services could accomplish in harness - could now focus its attention on

Kandahar, the next most troublesome province.

But seven years on - after seven more years of fighting, the 2014 withdrawal of most NATO troops (but not the 8,000 US forces still in country), changing administrations in Washington and Kabul and countless more killed and wounded on both sides in this seemingly never-ending war - the Taliban's white banners are flying over Marjah once again, poppy production continues unabated and the regional capital, Lashkar Gah, is once more under virtual siege. Indeed, with most of Helmand province back under the Taliban's control and another fighting season getting under way as the winter recedes, it's as though Operation Moshtarak never happened, that it was just a billion dollar blip in this country's terrible recent history.

Nagieb Khaja went to Helmand to talk to both sides - Taliban and Afghan government forces - to find out why things have come full circle and where this most futile of wars is going.

Kaynak/Source: