

# A Brief History of the War in Southern Afghanistan

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## **A Brief History of the War in Southern Afghanistan \***

Southern Afghanistan has always been the heart of the Taliban. It is where Taliban originated from and from where they conquered the vast majority of the country. It is now the main battlefield of the war in Afghanistan. Since 2006, the Taliban have held Kandahar, Afghanistan's second city, under threat. If they succeed in wresting it from the Afghan government, the state of Afghanistan will be dealt a crippling blow; perhaps a mortal one.

How did it come to this? After a supposedly crushing defeat at the hands of the Northern Alliance and United States, how did the Taliban all but regain control of the south? This paper attempts to answer that question, focusing on the period from 2002 to the middle of 2006. A second paper will look at how the Afghan government and Coalition have tried to push back the Taliban since the middle of 2006.

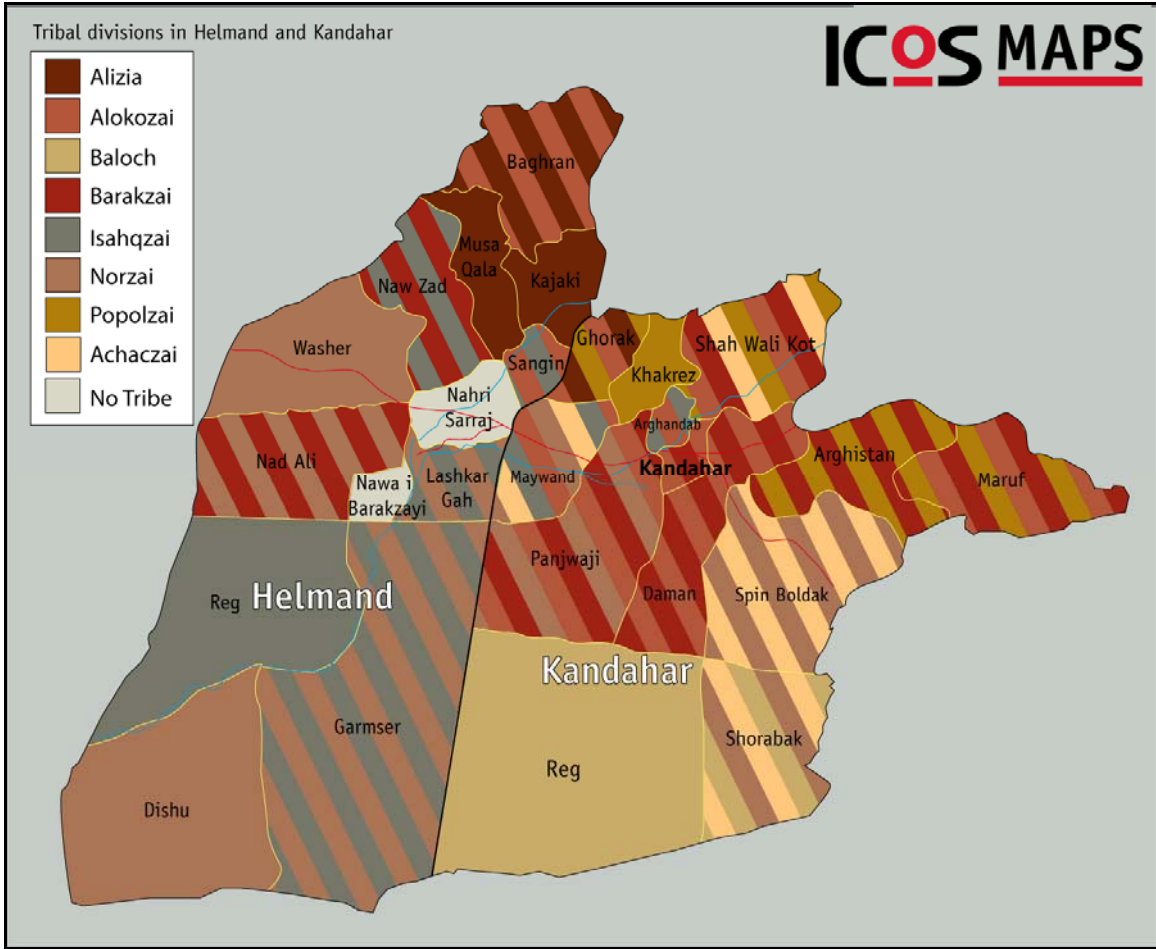
The key points from this paper are:

- The resurgence of the Taliban in southern Afghanistan is largely due to a US and Afghan policy of backing warlords. The policy of working with warlords from certain tribes resulted in the exclusion of other tribes.
- The Taliban won over the allegiance of these marginalized tribes as well as other marginalized groups.
- With new tribal allies and a cut of the poppy trade, the Taliban were able to marshal sufficient resources to take on the government.
- Poppy eradication increased local opposition to the government.
- The government could not rally enough popular support to defeat the Taliban.
- The scarcity of Coalition forces allowed the Taliban to openly challenge the government but better government policies could have stopped the Taliban from having any popular or tribal support in the first place.

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\* The Marine Corps Intelligence Activity sponsors this research.

*Map 1) Tribal Divisions in Helmand and Kandahar*



Source: "Afghanistan: Decision Point," The International Council on Security and Development, January 2008: 25.

### **How the Taliban Returned**

At the end of 2001, US and Afghan forces pushed the Taliban out of southern Afghanistan. The Taliban leadership fled to Pakistan. Religious leaders, tribal elders, and fighters who had supported the Taliban for the most part accepted the new government led by President Hamid Karzai. For three years, the south and west of Afghanistan would be largely peaceful. Yet the Taliban had not disappeared. In 2006, they re-emerged in force. What had happened was that government leaders of southern Afghanistan had marginalized rival tribal leaders and pushed them into the arms of the Taliban. Sanctuary in Pakistan and the scarcity of Coalition forces in the south helped the Taliban get back into southern Afghanistan. However, neither would have mattered if government leaders had adopted policies that had not antagonized large segments of the population.

### The Opposing Sides

Before 2001, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan with the assistance of groups from certain tribes, such as the Noorzai, the Alikozai, and the Itzakzai. The fall of the Taliban brought their opponents back into power, most importantly the Barakzai and Popalzai tribes. Both the Barakzai and the Popalzai are leading tribes of the Durrani tribal confederation; an elite with a long history at the center of Afghan politics. Hamid Karzai belonged to the Popalzai tribe. The Barakzai traditionally ruled Afghanistan.

In order to build his political support, Karzai appointed warlords from other tribes, supporters of his family, and his own family members into positions of power in southern Afghanistan.

In Kandahar, Gul Agha Sherzai, a Barakzai with a large militia, became governor. The Achekzai tribe, which had been marginalized by the Taliban, backed him up. The United States helped fund him. Another powerful figure was Ahmed Wali Karzai, Hamid Karzai's brother. He

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eventually became provincial council chairman. He also fielded a militia. These two strongmen filled provincial and district government positions with Barakzai and Popalzai elite.<sup>1</sup>

Kandahar city itself was protected by the Alikozai militia of Mullah Naqibullah—an opponent of Sherzai but a supporter of Hamid Karzai—and the Alikozai police force of Akram Khakrizwal. Many Alikozai had realigned with Karzai in 2001 as the Taliban regime fell apart.

In Helmand, Karzai made his close friend, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, governor. The Akhundzada family was part of the powerful Alizai tribe, which dominated the province.<sup>2</sup> Sher Mohammed's brother, Amir Mohammed Akhundzada, became district governor of Musa Qala (northern Helmand), an area of strong Alizai presence. Sher Mohammed also allied with a warlord from the Alikozai tribe, Dad Mohammed Khan, who held power in Sangin (northeast Helmand).<sup>3</sup>

The Barakzai tribe tended to support the government in Helmand and certainly encouraged the relative security that existed in Lashkar Gah and the central heart of the Helmand River Valley.

Security forces in southern Afghanistan comprised the police and the “Afghan Military Forces.” The former were deputized militias that may have worn a uniform. The latter were little more than deputized militias with unit designations. Afghan Military Forces were not the Afghan National Army, which was being trained and gradually stood up under the supervision of the United States. The police and various Afghan Military Forces fell under commanders strongly tied to Sherzai or Sher Mohammed.

All of these leaders based their power on the opium trade. Drug barons as well as government officials they ran parts of the trade, protected other drug barons, and made large

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, “The Inverted Cycle: Kabul and the Strongmen’s Competition for Control over Kandahar, 2001–2006,” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (June 2007): 175.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking, 2008), 321–322.

<sup>3</sup> Matt DuPee, “Karzai’s Lashkar; A Tribal Rogue’s Gallery,” *Afgaha.com*, 13 September 2006. Accessed 31 October 2008.

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profits from it. And they used their political and military power against traditional opponents and competitors.

*Table 1) Tribes of Helmand, Kandahar, and Zabul*

Tribe	Province	Comment
Barakzai (Durrani)	Kandahar, Helmand	Traditional rulers of Afghanistan
Popalzai (Durrani)	Kandahar, Uruzgan	Tribe of President Hamid Karzai
Alikozai (Durrani)	Kandahar, Helmand	Many left the Taliban in 2001 to back Karzai
Achekzai (Durrani)	Kandahar	Backed Kandahar Governor Sherzai
Alizai (Durrani)	Helmand	Powerful tribe in Helmand
Noorzai (Durrani)	Kandahar, Helmand	Supported the Taliban (pre-2001)
Itzakzai (Durrani)	Kandahar	Supported the Taliban (pre-2001)
Hotak (Ghilzai)	Zabul	Competitors with Durrani confederation
Khakar (Ghilzai)	Zabul, Uruzgan	Competitors with Durrani confederation
Tokhi (Ghilzai)	Zabul	Competitors with Durrani confederation
Baluch	Kandahar, Helmand	Non-Pashtun, reside near Pakistani border

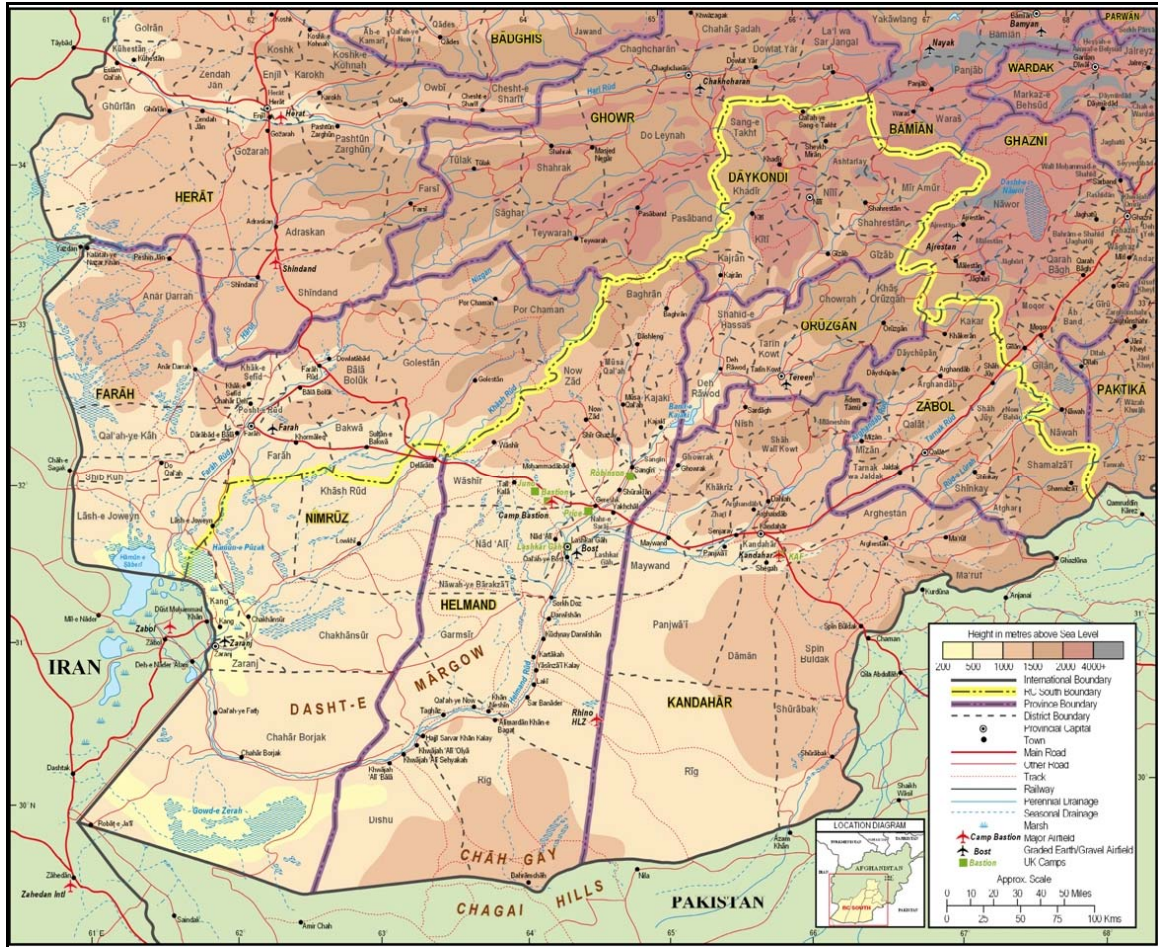
*Table 2) Warlords of Helmand and Kandahar, 2002–2005*

Name	Tribe	Province	Position
Gul Agha Sherzai	Barakzai	Kandahar	Governor*
Ahmed Wali Karzai	Popalzai	Kandahar	Prominent leader
Mullah Naqibullah	Alikozai	Kandahar	Militia commander
Abdul Razik	Achekzai	Kandahar	Militia commander
Sher Mohammed Akhundzada	Alizai	Helmand	Governor
Amir Dad Mohammed Khan	Alikozai	Helmand	Militia commander

\* Sherzai was briefly sent to Kabul in 2003.

The newly marginalized tribes were the Noorzai in Kandahar and Helmand, the Itzakzai in Helmand, and certain Ghilzai tribes in Zabul. They did not receive many government positions or have their militias inducted into the police. The Noorzai and Itzakzai also played a large role in the drug trade, which put them at odds with the Achekzai-Barakzai-Popalzai-Alizai ruling class. Most of the tribes in Kandahar and Helmand were part of the Durrani tribal confederation, though some had links to the Ghilzai tribal confederation as well. The Ghilzai tribal confederation had been in conflict with the Durrani for centuries. Like the Noorzai and Itzakzai (who are Durrani), Ghilzai tribes received little assistance from the new leaders of southern Afghanistan.

*Map 2) Regional Command South – Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Uruzgan, and Zabul (also shows Farah)*



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Source: World Briefing Maps, RC South, Defence Geographic Centre, ICG, Ministry of Defence, United Kingdom, 2008. Online at <http://www.operations.mod.uk/mapping/RCSouth.jpg> (as of 7 January 2009).



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To be clear, it is a little misleading to pose the conflict in southern Afghanistan as one of marginalized versus empowered tribes. There is no such thing as a coherent tribe in southern Afghanistan. Tribes are fragmented and laid on top of one another across different districts and villages. A large number of elders who wield varying degrees of power exist in every tribe. No one elder controls an entire tribe. Indeed, under Pashtun custom, no Pashtun can give an order to another. So instead of different tribes fighting tribes, different groups (or sometimes family clans) from different tribes were in conflict. Other groups were not. Plenty of Noorzais worked with the pro-government leaders and plenty of Alizais and Achekzais supported the Taliban.<sup>4</sup> For simplicity sake, though, we will continue to refer to tribes rather than specific sub-groups and clans.

The Taliban itself was not a tribal movement but an insurgent movement with extensive religious connections and, eventually, tribal alliances. Mullah Omar still led the Taliban. After 2001, he started to reform the movement in Pakistan. Extensive training and organizational activities started up. In 2003, Mullah Omar formed the Quetta shura (located in Quetta, the capital of the Pakistani province of Baluchistan) to coordinate the activities of multiple Taliban sub-groups. The principal operational commander in southern Afghanistan was Mullah Dadullah Lang, a 25-year veteran of Afghan wars.<sup>5</sup> Mullah Dadullah was from the Kakar tribe, part of the Ghilzai tribal confederation.

### Opportunity Lost: 2002–2004

From 2001 to 2004, Kandahar, Helmand, and the other southern and western provinces were relatively calm.

In Kandahar, Governor Sherzai solidified his hold on power. His US funding thinned but he was able to make this up with opium profits and illegal appropriation of customs taxes at the

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<sup>4</sup> Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, “The Inverted Cycle: Kabul and the Strongmen’s Competition for Control over Kandahar, 2001–2006,” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (June 2007): 183.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Rubin, “In the Land of the Taliban,” *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 2006.

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Spin Boldak border crossing with Pakistan. Sherzai delivered spoils and patronage to his own supporters, at the expense of the Noorzai. His Achekzai militia helped secure his position against the Taliban. Unfortunately, over the long term, his militia would undermine security by taxing the people and threatening elders.<sup>6</sup> No rule of law existed to punish militias for their transgressions.<sup>7</sup>

Another Achekzai militia, under Abdul Razik, served as the border police, based at Spin Boldak. Abdul Razik was a charismatic figure who drew fierce loyalty from his men. He excelled at small unit tactics and leading men in battle. The Taliban had killed his father, earning Abdul Razik's vengeance. He was no friend of the Taliban but also did not stop his Achekzai tribesmen (the minority tribe in the area) from extorting illegal taxes and branding the Noorzai as Taliban.<sup>8</sup>

In Helmand, Sher Mohammed charted the same course as Sherzai. He empowered his Akhundzada clan by distributing patronage to them, such as land or profits from narcotics. Sher Mohammed was deeply involved in the opium trade (along with the provincial chief of police, Abdul Rahman Jan). Some mullahs and teachers opposed to poppy production were reportedly gunned down. His militia was brutal. In 2003, they raided a town in Musa Qala, ostensibly to go after Taliban. They left 80 dead; mostly civilians whose families Sher Mohammed refused to compensate. Helping the people was not his priority. From 2001 to 2003, there were no paved roads, no electricity, or running water in Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital. The police were Sher Mohammed's minions. Together with Sher Mohammed's own 100-man militia, they abused

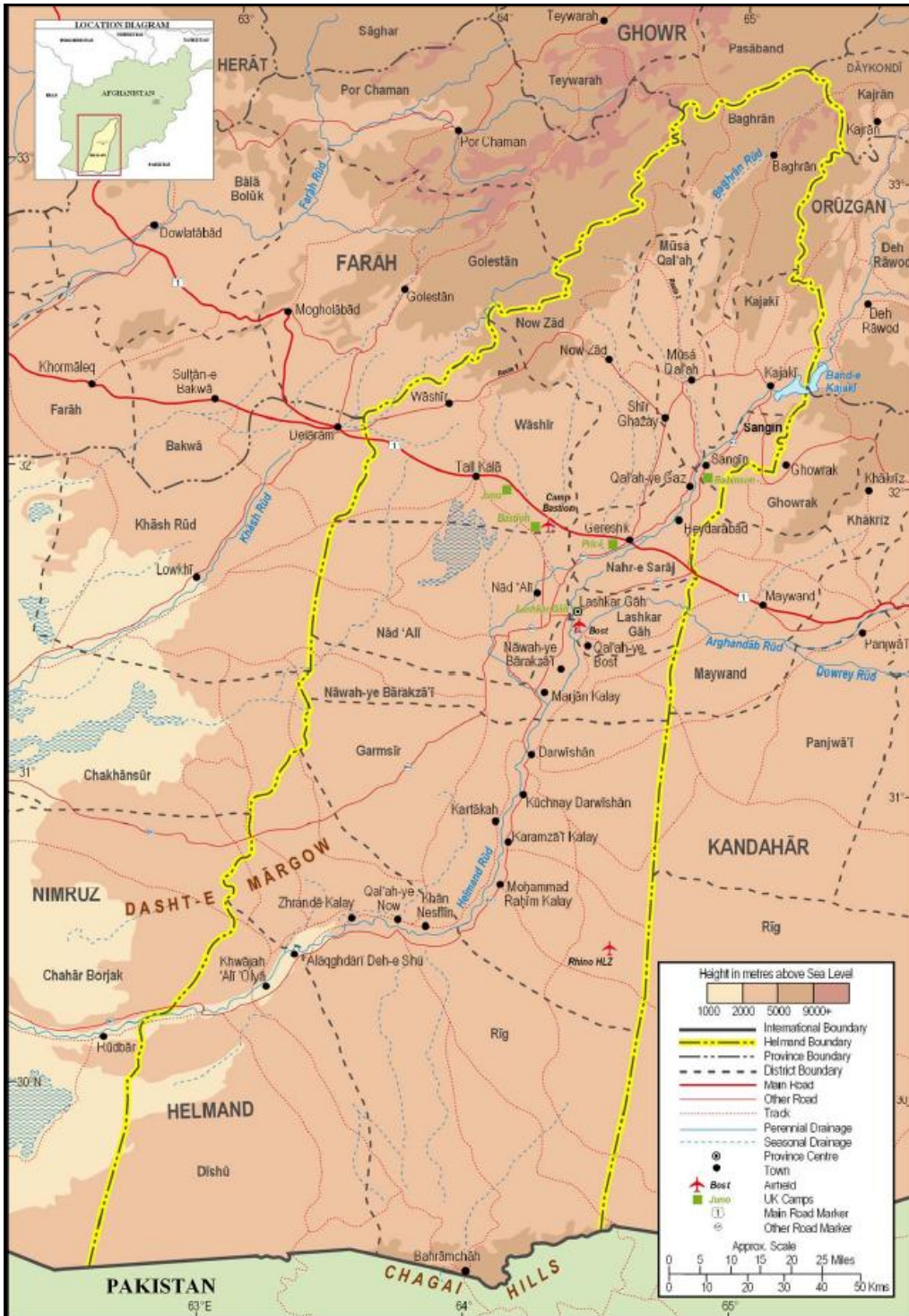
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<sup>6</sup> Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, "The Inverted Cycle: Kabul and the Strongmen's Competition for Control over Kandahar, 2001–2006," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (June 2007): 173.

<sup>7</sup> Some US units worked with Sherzai's militia, others did not. USIP Afghanistan Experience Project, Interview #33, 13 July 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Captain John Duorak and Captain Dan Snow, Fort Riley, 29 October 2008. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 48, 55.

Map 3) Helmand Province



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Source: World Briefing Maps, Helmand Province (Afghanistan), Defence Geographic Centre, ICG, Ministry of Defence, United Kingdom, 2008. Online at <http://www.operations.mod.uk/mapping/HelmandProvince.jpg> (as of 7 January 2009).

and taxed the people at illegal checkpoints.<sup>9</sup> In Sangin, Dad Mohammed Khan marginalized the majority Itzakzai tribe, who also dominated the poppy in the area. They were heavily taxed.<sup>10</sup>

Sher Mohammed's thuggery opened the door for the Taliban to return to Helmand in force. The Taliban, in fact, attributed their success in the province to Sher Mohammed and his militias. The Taliban approached the victims of abuse and offered their support, sometimes paying them thousands of dollars. Their allegiance was not hard to win.<sup>11</sup>

Along Helmand's green zone, the Taliban took advantage of the situation of non-native farmers and migrant workers. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, large-scale irrigation projects and the construction of the Kajaki dam drew large numbers of Afghans to the Helmand River. No tribal barriers stood in the way of Taliban infiltration. Moreover, the farmers had little reason to oppose Taliban infiltration. Without local tribal links, these non-natives suffered at the hands of the Akhundzadas. The Taliban were just as good for them as the status quo. Migrant workers, who came to work on farms and pick poppy, were in a similar situation—unprotected and amenable to Taliban influence.

Marginalized tribes proved the real jewel, though. The Taliban allied themselves with the Itzakzai tribe in Sangin and minority clans of the Alizai in Baghran, Kajaki, and Musa Qala. The Noorzai and Itzakzai provided food, shelter, and intelligence for Taliban leaders and facilitators infiltrating into Afghanistan from Pakistan. Later they would provide the vast majority of the fighters.<sup>12</sup> The same thing was happening in Kandahar.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Eugene Augustine, PRT Lashkar Gah commander (2004–2005), 6 August 2008. Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Jim Hogberg, Commander of PRT Lashkar Gah, (2005–2006), 4 September 2008. Patrick Bishop, *3PARA* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 153.

<sup>10</sup> Discussion with Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 24 October 2008. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking, 2008), 321–322.

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 60. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking, 2008), 322.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 22, 60–61.

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Besides co-opting tribes and non-native farmers, the Taliban moved to take over religious leadership of the south, which had not been speaking in their favor. The Kandahar Ulema Shura, a council of religious leaders in Kandahar, consistently issued fatwas condemning Taliban attacks and the killing of civilians. Their fatwas held greater influence over the people than statements by Afghan political leaders on the television or radio.<sup>13</sup> The Taliban started re-constructing their religious networks in the south between 2003 and 2005 in the south, starting in Zabul's Shah Joy district. "Wandering mullahs" ventured to rural districts to extend Taliban religious influence over local religious leaders. Other mullahs went into Kandahar city to counter the influence of the Kandahar Ulema Shura. Religious networks formed in northern Helmand in 2004. Violence accompanied the religious networks. Most notably, in June and July 2003, the Taliban killed three mullahs in Kandahar.<sup>14</sup>

In many places, there was no one to stop the Taliban. The Coalition usually had a battalion in Kandahar. They never deployed enough men to control all of Kandahar, let alone Helmand. The government and its tribal allies did not make up the difference. Relying on militias for security, the government never built up the Afghan National Police (ANP). The average district had 15–50 police, too few to do more than defend their own headquarters. Some districts had no government presence at all. Where the government was not, the Taliban and their tribal allies could intimidate the people and prevent them from supporting the government.<sup>15</sup> The Taliban set up strong networks in areas of weak government presence, such as Shah Wali Kot

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<sup>13</sup> Sean Maloney, "A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 215.

<sup>14</sup> Sean Maloney, "A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 206. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 42–44, 50.

<sup>15</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 30, 177.

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district in northern Kandahar, Zharey and Panjwai districts west of Kandahar city, and Meref district on the Pakistani border.<sup>16</sup>

*Table 3) US battalions in southern Afghanistan, 2001–2006*

<b>Unit</b>	<b>Province</b>	<b>Time Period</b>
26 MEU and 15 MEU	Helmand	November 2001–2002
3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne HQ	Kandahar	July 2002–January 2003
1-505th PIR	Kandahar	July 2002–January 2003
3-505th PIR	Kandahar	July 2002–September 2002
1st Brigade 82nd Airborne HQ	Kandahar	February 2003–August 2003
1-504th PIR	Kandahar	February 2003–August 2003
2-22th Infantry	Kandahar	August 2003–May 2004
22 MEU, BLT 1/6	Uruzgan	April 2004–August 2004
3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division	Kandahar	May 2004–June 2005
2 US Army infantry companies	Uruzgan	May 2004–June 2005
2-5th Infantry	Zabul	May 2004–June 2005
173rd Airborne Brigade HQ	Kandahar	March 2005–March 2006
3-319th Artillery	Kandahar	March 2005–March 2006
2/503rd Airborne	Kandahar, Zabul	March 2005–March 2006

The false calm of Kandahar and Helmand was not mirrored in Zabul (that borders Kandahar to the northeast and east), a rugged province with few Coalition forces (after 2004, one battalion operated out of Qalat, the provincial capital). Its border with Pakistan offered the Taliban an easy infiltration route while the inhabitants of mountain valleys in the north had little love for the government. Large and capable groups of fighters lived in the distant and rugged northern districts of Kaki Afghan, Mazan, and Dai Chopan. A few Taliban cadres had taken refuge in these areas in 2002.<sup>17</sup>

The Taliban regained influence in Zabul through their religious network and exploiting tribal rifts. Mullah Dadullah supervised the Taliban’s infiltration into Zabul. Events there foreshadowed the future of Helmand and Kandahar. Zabul was divided between the majority Ghilzai (Hotak, Khakar, and Tokhi tribes) and the minority Durrani Pashtuns. These Ghilzai

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<sup>16</sup> Sean Maloney, “A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 207, 208.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*: 203.

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tribes were inclined to oppose the government on the basis of the longstanding rift between the Ghilzais and Durrani. When Karzai replaced the governor in 2003, a Tokhi Ghilzai, with a Durrani, elements of that tribe stopped fighting for the government.

From 2003 to 2005, the Coalition and Afghan security forces periodically got into major firefights in Zabul. In the summer of 2003, dozens of Afghan National Army soldiers and police died fighting in Dai Chopan district. When US forces started launching counterstrikes against suspected insurgent safe havens, the violence only worsened. In September of that year, Operation Mountain Viper was launched with the purpose of clearing out 500 Taliban under Mullah Dadullah. Fighting lasted for nine days. Security did not improve. By winter, five of seven districts fell under Taliban control. Elders in these districts opposed the government. In certain cases, those who did not were executed. Fighting persisted in 2004.<sup>18</sup>

One last factor has not been discussed in the Taliban's post-2001 activities in Helmand and Kandahar—poppies. The poppy trade probably had something to do with the Taliban's return to power. Poppy production in Helmand and Kandahar equaled between \$200 and \$400 million per year between 2004 and 2006, based on the price of opium and the number of hectares under cultivation. Such sums dwarf US development spending in any province. While the average poppy farmer or landowner saw little of that, it seems unlikely that the Taliban could ever have amassed the resources to take on the poppy-funded Popalzai, Alizai, and Barakzai without getting a major cut of the poppy trade themselves.

The Taliban, together with the Noorzai, Itzakzai, other tribes, and non-native farmers, may have been able to capture a substantial share of the poppy trade. Between 2004 and 2007, poppy cultivation in Afghanistan grew from 75,000 hectares to 175,000 hectares. The Taliban may have seized a large share of this expanding poppy trade, most likely by extorting or offering

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Lee Knight, PRT Qalat commander (2004-2005), 11 August 2008. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking, 2008), 247, 253. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 50, 51, 56, 179.

protection to poppy farmers and smugglers not aligned with the pro-government warlords. The Taliban may have gone from getting a share of the poppy profits from very few hectares in 2002 to very many by 2005, even while the pro-government warlords maintained or expanded their own shares. Thereby, the pro-government warlords may have found themselves without a decisive resource advantage over the Taliban, especially if the Taliban had allied with marginalized tribes and non-native farmers at the same time. There is not enough evidence to know exactly how the Taliban massed enough resources to rival the pro-government warlords but poppy probably had something to do with it.

#### The end of the beginning: 2005

The year of 2005 set the stage for the upheaval that would occur in 2006. Low-level skirmishes and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, hitherto uncommon, became more commonplace (see Figure 1). In April 2005, the Taliban media spokesman, Abdul Latif Hakimi, declared that government officials, aid workers, and Coalition forces would now be targeted. Over the year, district governors were assassinated and suicide car bombs and suicide bombers went off regularly. Night letters threatened those working with the government, labeling them collaborators or spies.<sup>19</sup> Improvised explosive devices, the scourge of Iraq, came to Afghanistan, striking not just Coalition forces but the softer police patrols and convoys as well.<sup>20</sup>

While the Taliban were taking out the competition, the government was at last trying to reform itself. An idealistic militia demobilization program—meant to transfer responsibility from militias (known as Afghan Military Forces) to trained government security forces (Afghan National Army)—removed some of the militias that had been keeping the Taliban down. Though

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Eugene Augustine, PRT Lashkar Gah commander (2004–2005), 6 August 2008. Sean Maloney, “A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 206.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Jim Hogberg, Commander of PRT Lashkar Gah, (2005–2006), 4 September 2008.



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some joined the Afghan National Army there were now fewer security forces out on the streets and in the villages.<sup>21</sup>

More importantly, Karzai finally removed the warlords from power. Sherzai went in June, replaced by Asadullah Khalid, a 39-year old outsider who lacked an independent power base and was beholden to Ahmed Wali.<sup>22</sup> Sher Mohammed followed in December, after the British lobbied to have him removed when 9 tons of opium was found in his offices. Mohammed Daoud, an engineer from the Safi tribe of eastern Afghanistan who had been born in Helmand, replaced him. Daoud had a solid background in development and no direct ties to opium; a model civil servant, in contrast to Sher Mohammed.

These moves had few positive effects. On the one hand, the warlords never fell out of the picture. Asadullah Khalid and Mohammed Daoud lacked the political base to overcome their influence. Through his brother, Amir Mohammed, the new deputy governor, Sher Mohammed, still exercised power in Helmand even though he was now a member of the Afghan parliament. With the departure of Sherzai, Ahmed Wali emerged as the most powerful leader in Kandahar. He gained control of the police through his dominance of opium profits. This tied them to his own policies of marginalizing other tribes.

On the other hand, the opposition to the Taliban had been weakened. The tribes and commanders opposing the Taliban lost important sources of patronage. Their removal from government positions and the disbandment of militias curtailed cuts from taxes and other legal and illicit sources of income. Influence over the police declined as well. In Helmand, in 2006, Akhundzada's militia would stop fighting the Taliban. Regarding the removal of Sher Mohammed, Karzai himself later said: "I made the mistake of listening to [the British]. And when they came in, the Taliban came."<sup>23</sup> The most damage was done in Kandahar. The Alikozai tribe

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<sup>21</sup> Sean Maloney, "A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 207.

<sup>22</sup> Sherzai had left briefly in 2003 to be governor of Kabul.

<sup>23</sup> "Friendly Fire in Afghanistan," *The Economist*, 2 February 2008: 62.

lost leadership of Afghan Military Forces and the Kandahar city police. Denied a source of patronage, Mullah Naqibullah could no longer maintain the loyalty of all of the men in his Alikozai militia and the Arghandab police (who were also Alikozai). As a result, small numbers of Taliban were able to infiltrate into the Arghandab and Kandahar city itself.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, the Taliban's religious campaign continued apace. Mullahs openly supporting the government came under attack. The Taliban killed 12 mullahs and issued numerous death threats between the summer of 2005 and 2006. Most notably, on 29 May 2005, the Taliban murdered the head of the Kandahar Ulema Shura, Maulawi Abdullah Fayeze. He had denounced Mullah Omar and said that the Taliban had no foundation in Islam. According to him, they were not worthy of jihad. At his funeral, a suicide bomber killed Mohammed Akram Khakrezwal, the honest and respected former Kandahar police chief. Two more religious scholars were killed on 21 August in Panjwai.<sup>25</sup>

The Taliban also attacked schools and teachers. Infamously, the Taliban beheaded a teacher in Shah Wali Kot district before his own class. Twenty schools were destroyed in the last four months of 2005. Two hundred then shut down throughout the southern provinces.<sup>26</sup>

Ironically, the September parliamentary elections passed without significant incident. Unfortunately, Coalition commanders read this as a sign security was good.<sup>27</sup> The elections hid how much had fallen apart.

The situation became particularly bloody in Helmand during the autumn. They mounted guerrilla-style hit and run attacks, IED attacks, and assassinations in the districts of Dishu, Sangin,

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<sup>24</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 61. Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, "The Inverted Cycle: Kabul and the Strongmen's Competition for Control over Kandahar, 2001–2006," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (June 2007): 176.

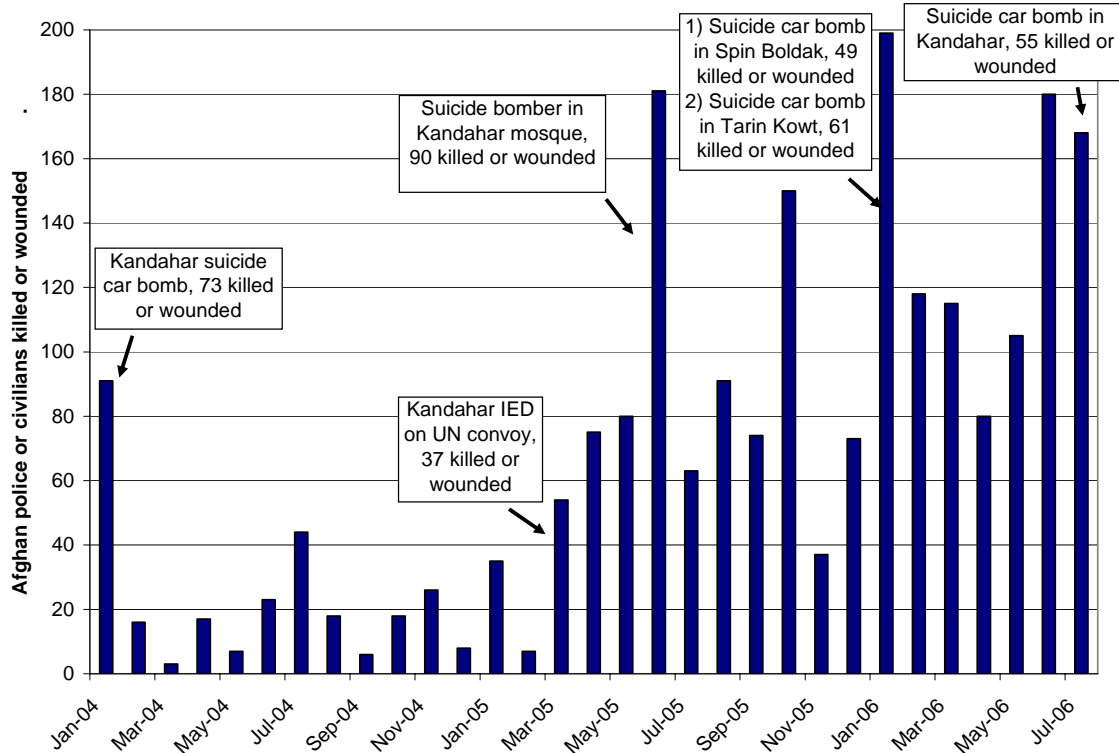
<sup>25</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking, 2008), 336. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 46.

<sup>26</sup> Sean Maloney, "A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 207.

<sup>27</sup> Colonel Kevin Owens Defense Department News Briefing, FDCH Political Transcripts, 23 September 2005.

Garmser, Nowzad, Baghran, and Nad-i-Ali. Over 50 police were killed, including 19 in a single ambush in Dishu district in southern Helmand bordering Pakistan. By the end of the year, the Taliban held sway over that district.<sup>28</sup>

Figure 1) Civilian and police casualties in Farah, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Urugan, and Zabul, 2004–2006<sup>29</sup>



The Coalition presence in southern Afghanistan at the time was the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade, commanded by Colonel Kevin Owens; 3,400 men spread across Kandahar, Helmand, and Zabul. One of its units—2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 503<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment—operated in Kandahar. Owens pushed his forces out on raiding missions against Taliban sanctuaries in mountainous Zabul and the northern districts of Kandahar. In his words, “I think we’ve had a lot of

<sup>28</sup> National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Data is from the National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

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success...being able to...go where coalition forces haven't been able to operate effectively in the past."<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, the population that needed protection was not in the mountains.

The only US unit in Helmand was the 74<sup>th</sup> Long Range Surveillance Detachment (roughly the size of a company), under the command of Captain Dirk Ringgenberg. It arrived in August and operated with one company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Kandak, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Afghan National Army Division. Highly effective tactically, Ringgenberg defeated several Taliban units in a series of quick strikes up and down the Helmand River. Unfortunately, the unit was too small and present for too short a time to secure the population. In October, the unit moved to Kandahar, where it conducted more operations. Despite impressive tactical successes, it could not stave off the growing Taliban influence.<sup>31</sup>

*Table 4) Operations of 74<sup>th</sup> Long Range Surveillance Detachment in Helmand and Kandahar<sup>32</sup>*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Operation</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Comments</b>
18 August 2005	Operation Wild Weasel	Nowzad	
3 September 2005	Operation Thunderstruck	Nowzad	
9 September 2005	Operation Unforgiven	Sangin	60 enemy casualties
16 September 2005	Operation Eagle Eyes	NA	Election support
23 September 2005	Operation Qal'eh ye gaz I	Sangin	
3 October 2005	Operation Qal'eh ye gaz II	Sangin	Significant combat
12 October 2005	Operation Ghar	Sangin	
16 October 2005	74th LRSD moves to Kandahar	NA	
10 November 2005	Operation Ghorak	Ghorak	Mounted patrol
13 November 2005	Operation Counterstrike	KAF	Uneventful
21 November 2005	Operation Afghan Ghar	Mineashin	
3 December 2005	Operation Mineashin I	Mineashin	3-day battle
13 December 2005	Operation Mineashin II	Mineashin	3-day battle
9 January 2006	Operation Mineashin III	Mineashin	Presence patrols
18 January 2006	Operation Mineashin IV	Mineashin	Presence patrols
29 January 2006	Operation Mineashin V	Mineashin	Aggressive patrol
1 February 2006	Operation Katasong	Shah Wali Kot	Long range patrol

The Taliban did not escape undefeated. Achekzai and Alizai militias and their affiliated police were ready to fight. For example, Achekzai villagers in Spin Boldak forced out the Taliban

<sup>30</sup> Colonel Kevin Owens Defense Department News Briefing, FDCH Political Transcripts, 23 September 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Interviews with Major Riggerberg, Fort Leavenworth, 27–28 October 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

after a gun battle in January 2006. Similarly, Haji Lalai Mama of Loi Karez in Kandahar formed a village defense force.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, such successes would soon become few and far between. The Taliban had set themselves up well. With key tribes on their side, a strong religious network, local leaders intimidated, and funding from the poppy trade, they were ready to strike.

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<sup>33</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 50.

### **The 2006 Taliban Spring Offensive: Open Warfare**

During the first half of 2006, the Taliban rose up. After spending four years rebuilding an underground movement, they moved out of the shadows and into the open, mounting conventional-style attacks on the Afghan National Police and the militias aligned with the government. Mullah Dadullah's goal was apparently to gain control of parts of the south. Some observers believed he ultimately wanted to capture Kandahar city itself.<sup>34</sup>

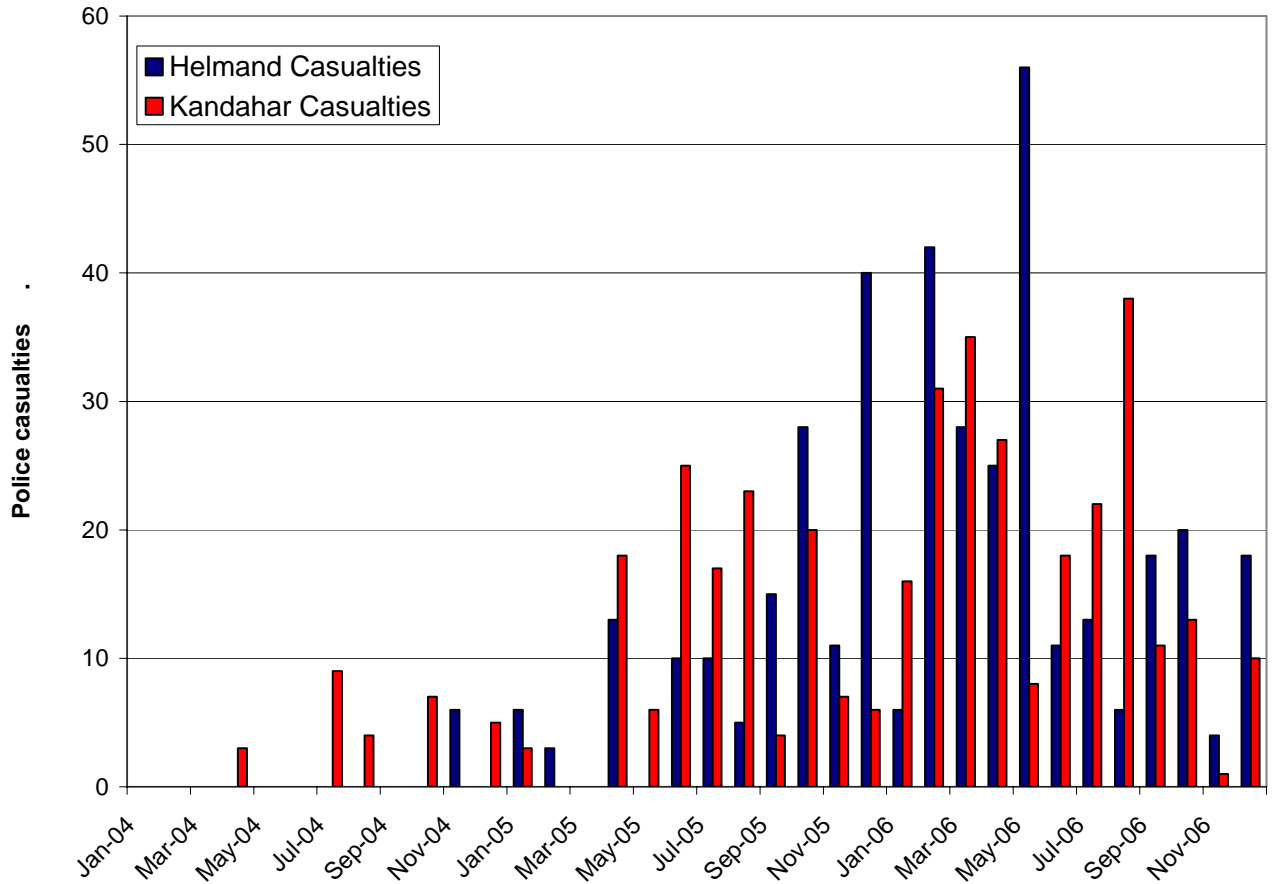
#### Kandahar

The "spring" offensive kicked off in January in Kandahar. Fighting broke out in 11 of Kandahar's 13 districts. District centers throughout the province were hit. The traditional government strongholds of Kandahar city and Spin Boldak suffered suicide car bomb and IED attacks. Provincial Governor Asadullah Khan himself endured a series of attacks. Above all, the police were the main target. The Taliban hit police headquarters in outlying districts (such as Rigestan and Meref) and patrols and checkpoints in any district.

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<sup>34</sup> Sean Maloney, "A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 211, 212.

Figure 2) Police casualties in Kandahar and Helmand, 2004–2006<sup>35</sup>



Coalition forces and civilians were targets as well. One suicide car bomb in Spin Boldak caused 49 civilian casualties. Another in Kandahar city killed a Canadian ambassador working with the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). As a result, the PRT, which had been trying to strengthen governance and accelerate economic development, reduced its activities, removing another Taliban competitor for the hearts and minds of the people.<sup>36</sup>

Taliban influence expanded from Shah Wali Kot into Maiwand, Zharey and Panjwai (bastions of the Noorzai tribe). The arrival of a Canadian battle group early in February and

<sup>35</sup> Data is from the National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

<sup>36</sup> The Canadians took over the PRT in Kandahar in July 2005. They provided a larger civilian and military complement than the United States had been able to provide. Sean Maloney, “A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol.19, no. 2 (June 2008): 210.

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Ahmed Wali's militia probably helped prevent the Taliban from gaining a foothold in Kandahar city itself. Amid the larger-scale attacks, the Ulema Shura retained a great deal of popular support and continued to condemn Taliban attacks. Consequently, the Taliban assassinated three popular mullahs and persisted in attempts to hamstring the shura.<sup>37</sup> The critical piece, though, was played by Mullah Naqibullah's Alikozai militia, which kept the Taliban from capturing the fertile Arghandab Valley just north of Kandahar city (known as the "gateway to Kandahar").

Still, the Taliban all but seized control over rural areas formerly under government influence, most notably Zharey and Panjwai, two districts with large Noorzai populations that had been quiet and had received substantial development aid before 2005. Yet the Taliban had been able to exploit Noorzai rivalry with government leaders to gain local support.<sup>38</sup> They set up an underground infrastructure and even constructed defensive positions in the Pashmul area to protect it. Local tribesmen aligned with the Taliban and formed the bulk of the fighting units in the area. Abdul Razik's Achekzai militia from Spin Boldak was sent to secure Zharey and Panjwai. The Noorzais roundly defeated them. When police from Kandahar (under the influence of Ahmed Wali, another Noorzai competitor) tried to come in and secure the districts in the spring of 2006, they too met fierce resistance and were turned back. The Canadians suspected that well over 1,000 fighters defended the area.<sup>39</sup>

In the aftermath of their success, the Taliban consolidated their control over the two districts. Pashmul became an armed camp. Women and children fled. Taliban manned checkpoints and patrolled the streets.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid: 215.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Rubin, "In the Land of the Taliban," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Harjit Sajjon, "How the Taliban Gained a Foothold in Southern Afghanistan in 2006," Presentation to the Center for a New American Security, 4 December 2008. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 55.

<sup>40</sup> Adnan Khan, "The View from Ambush Alley," *Maclean's*, 11 September 2006.



## Helmand

As bad as it was in Kandahar, the situation in Helmand where pro-government and Coalition forces were weaker was as bad, if not worse.

The Taliban offensive, organized by Mullah Dadullah, started on 3 February with three simultaneous attacks on government posts. All three were in the northern part of the province: the Musa Qala police headquarters, the Nowzad district center, and the Sangin police headquarters. In Musa Qala (an Akhundzada power base), the Taliban killed the district police chief and wounded four policemen. Nowzad escaped with only one officer killed. Sangin took the biggest hit. Three hundred Taliban fell upon the Sangin district police headquarters. Many were Itzakzai upset at Alikozai dominance over the town and determined to drive out Dad Mohammed Khan's militia.<sup>41</sup> Fighting lasted for three days before ISAF air strikes finally drove off the attackers. Five police were killed and sixteen were wounded.<sup>42</sup>

Over the following days, attacks continued. Posts, patrols, tribal elders, religious leaders, district chiefs, and district governors were all targets, members of the Akhundzada clan in particular. The Taliban infiltrated into the heart of Helmand's population—the districts of Gereshk, Lashkar Gah, and Nad-i-Ali. A police post in Gereshk was overrun; four police were killed, and three were kidnapped and later found dead. A post in Nad-i-Ali suffered a similar fate. A few police were even taken from their homes and beheaded. Though the Taliban lacked the strength to overthrow the government in these districts, it was clear that no district was safe from their attacks.<sup>43</sup>

The Taliban gained their first real foothold in Musa Qala. According to one resident, “The government was in Musa Qala and everything was fine. But then the Taliban attacked the

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<sup>41</sup> His nephew had already been killed.

<sup>42</sup> National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking, 2008), 359. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 60.

<sup>43</sup> National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

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district office and the police station, and took control over the areas around Musa Qala bazaar. There was fighting everyday. Some of our relatives were killed and wounded.”<sup>44</sup> The district police chief was killed at the end of March.<sup>45</sup> It would be nearly two years before the government truly re-asserted control of the district.

The police did not help its situation by continuing to treat the population poorly: arresting innocent people in order to extort their family member, looting private property, and selling seized opium.<sup>46</sup>

The poppy eradication program did not help either. In March, Afghan authorities launched an eradication program funded by the United States and United Kingdom. The eradication program did nothing to improve the position of Helmand Governor Mohammed Daoud or Kandahar Governor Asadullah Khan. At the time they most needed popular support, the income of thousands of farmers was cut down. Worse, the government enforced eradication in a biased fashion. The land of tribes in competition with Ahmed Wali or Sher Mohammed, such as the Noorzai, was targeted for eradication. Additionally, wealthy landowners may have been exempt and farmers could escape eradication if they could pay a fee. In general, Afghan farmers strongly opposed the program. It took away their livelihood. Some called for retaliation. Others fought.<sup>47</sup>

In Helmand, the program started in Dishu but resistance was so great it was shifted to Nowzad and Garmser. One woman from Sangin said, “the government and foreigners would destroy the [opium] crops. But this was the only income for the poor people.”<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Rubin, a journalist writing for the *New York Times Magazine*, quoted one poppy farm owner: “Why do you think people put mines out for the British...doing eradication when they came here to save

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<sup>44</sup> “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008: 99–100.

<sup>45</sup> National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 175, 177.

<sup>47</sup> “Helmand at War,” Senlis Council Report, 2 June 2008.

<sup>48</sup> “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008: 105.

us?...Thousands of lands [sic] ready for harvest were destroyed. How difficult will it be for our people to tolerate that! You are taking the food of my children, cutting my feet and disabling me.”<sup>49</sup> The Taliban deftly exploited the situation to win more support, stepping in to protect farmers against poppy eradication and offering to cancel any debts the farmers carried.<sup>50</sup>

Attacks in Helmand peaked in May when Mullah Dadullah launched massed attacks against the district centers. On the night of 17 May, the Taliban and ANP fought for eight hours at the district center in Musa Qala (roughly 100 ANP held the town of Musa Qala). The ANP recovered 14 bodies but suffered 13 killed and 5 wounded themselves.<sup>51</sup> Amir Akhundzada’s militia and 30 newly arrived British Paras reinforced the ANP. In subsequent fighting, the tenacity of the ANP impressed the British. A sergeant major told journalist Patrick Bishop: “They weren’t shy of getting amongst it...One of them was shot through the calf and one through the shoulder and after they were patched up they wanted to get straight back to the fighting which I thought was quit hard of them.”<sup>52</sup>

The problem for the ANP was not fighting spirit, though, but the support of the people. Without it, the Taliban could repeatedly re-enter Musa Qala. Fighting resumed in Musa Qala on 22 May. By then, the police had taken refuge in their station, rarely venturing out. Several days of fighting followed. With the cooperation of the ANP, the British drove back the Taliban but now found themselves garrisoning the district center (Amir Akhundzada’s militia did not stay).<sup>53</sup>

Fighting spanned beyond Musa Qala. Throughout the province, ANP and ANA convoys were ambushed. The provincial chief of police was one target. Insurgents failed to kill him but did get a district police chief and two senior former mujahedin commanders. Associates of Sher

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<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Rubin, “In the Land of the Taliban,” *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 2006.

<sup>50</sup> “Afghan Insurgency Assessment,” Senlis Council Report, 7 April 2006: 11, 12, 15, 16, 18, 21, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Annex I: List of Incidents in Helmand Province, “Helmand at War,” Senlis Council Report, 2 June 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Patrick Bishop, *3PARA* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 53, 151.

<sup>53</sup> Sean Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone: The Real Story from the Frontline in Afghanistan* (London: Constable, 2008), 45–47.

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Mohammed Akhundzada were also targeted.<sup>54</sup> Some policemen were even kidnapped and then decapitated. The district governor of Nowzad begged for British support lest the Taliban overrun the police (the police in Nowzad were from Lashkar Gah and Gereshk; the lack of local connections, on top of their abusive behavior, may have made it more difficult for them to collect intelligence on the Taliban). Haji Zainokhan, district governor of Baghran, and his retinue fled to Camp Bastion on a British helicopter.<sup>55</sup> Insurgents killed or wounded 56 police in Helmand that month; more than any other month to that point.<sup>56</sup>

The final blow came in Sangin. Amir Dad Mohammed Khan (also known as “Amir Dado”), the Alikozai warlord who controlled the district (he was a representative in the Afghan legislature in Kabul), had few local supporters. The district governor, Amir Jan, had been killed in March. In June, members of the majority Itzakzai tribe associated with the Taliban defeated Dad Mohammed’s militia and gained control of the district center. Large numbers of Dad Mohammed’s family were killed in the process.<sup>57</sup> One resident related, “The fight started after Amir Dad Mohammed Khan’s brother was killed. The situation worsened with more than fifty supporters of Amir Dad Mohammed killed in one day. The district office was seized forcing the [new] District Governor to leave. Soon after there was general fighting and bombings.”<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Rubin recounted how one Taliban commander, Mullah Razayar Nurzai, described some of these attacks:

A few days earlier, Nurzai and his men had attacked Amir Dado’s extended family. First, he told me, they shot dead his brother—a former district leader. Then the next day, as members of Dado’s family were driving to the site of the first attack, Nurzai’s men ambushed their convoy. Boys, cousins, uncles: all were killed.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Patrick Bishop, *3PARA* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 56, 60.

<sup>56</sup> National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed October 2008.

<sup>57</sup> “In the Dark,” *The Economist*, 2 February 2008: 49. Waliullah Rahmani, “Helmand Province and the Afghan Insurgency,” *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 6, 23 March 2006. Online at [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org) (accessed September 2008).

<sup>58</sup> “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008: 97.

<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Rubin, “In the Land of the Taliban,” *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 2006.

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Rubin later witnessed Taliban in Pakistan celebrating one attack intended for Dad Mohammed himself.<sup>60</sup> A woman who fled to Lashkar Gah said, “The Taliban were stronger and we couldn’t defeat them. The foreigners would later come and bombard the villages. I had to protect my children and family so we fled here.”<sup>61</sup> Fifty-two policemen perished in fighting around Sangin during the first 6 months of 2006.<sup>62</sup> Many residents of Sangin fled to Lashkar Gah. Houses and the bazaar were destroyed. The remaining elders kicked out the police chief.<sup>63</sup>

Militias and ANP fought to the end in northern Helmand, to little avail. The result of all these attacks was that by the summer the police were either overrun or left beleaguered in the district centers. Seven district police chiefs had been killed.<sup>64</sup> Suicide bombers had blown themselves up in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah (one killed the former Helmand police chief and wounded scores of civilians). In Gereshk, the other major population center, the Taliban walked openly on the roads. “Spies” had been publicly hung. The ring road from Lashkar Gah to Kandahar could only be driven in the daytime. Other roads were blocked entirely by Taliban checkpoints. Nowzad, Dishu, Musa Qala, and Kajaki were said to be largely under Taliban control. The police did nothing.<sup>65</sup>

### The Shattered State

Roughly 350 civilians and police were killed in Kandahar in the first six months of 2006 compared to roughly 200 in the last six months of 2005. In Helmand, it was the same story: roughly 270 compared to 160.<sup>66</sup> The ability of the government to stand against a resurgent

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008: 97.

<sup>62</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 179.

<sup>63</sup> Patrick Bishop, *3PARA* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 108.

<sup>64</sup> National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed November 2008.

<sup>65</sup> “Helmand at War,” Senlis Council, 2 June 2006. “Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008,” Senlis Council Report, February 2008, 107. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), 61, 180.

<sup>66</sup> National Counter Terrorism Center Incident Database, <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, accessed November 2008.

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Taliban was in question. The misrule of the past four years had left the government unable to rally enough support to defeat the Taliban. To counter this situation, the Coalition reinforced the south. The arrival of the British saved the Afghans opposing the Taliban and prevented them from completely defeating government forces in Helmand. In Kandahar, the Taliban offensive had never really threatened Kandahar City but the arrival of Canadians helped prevent the situation from getting worse. The British and Canadian presence was proof that the war had escalated. The Taliban had shattered government authority in the south and had opened a full-fledged guerrilla war.





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