

APPRAISING MOSHTARAK

The Campaign in Nad-e-Ali District, Helmand

Theo Farrell



Operation *Moshtarak* involved two simultaneous offensives launched on 13 Feb 2010; one by the US Marine Corps in Marjah, South of Nad-e-Ali, and one by the British-led Task Force Helmand (TFH) in North Nad-e-Ali. This paper provides independent analysis of the planning and conduct of operations by TFH.

Recent US media reports have noted that progress has been slow in Marjah with Taliban re-infiltration and intimidation of the local population. Such reporting fails to note the very encouraging progress in Nad-e-Ali. Insurgents have been pushed to the outskirts of the district. Freedom of movement for civilians and security forces within the district has dramatically improved. The district has an effective governor, public services and the police are getting better, and a new, more representative district community council has been elected.

Operation *Moshtarak* demonstrates that in Southern Afghanistan, ISAF is practising what it preaches – a political-led, population-centric approach to counter-insurgency that is generally well integrated with Afghan national security forces (ANSF). It also shows how ‘the McChrystal effect’ – the reinvigoration of ISAF’s campaign under clear strategic direction – has been amplified in the South by a beefed-up Regional Command (South) under Major General Nick Carter and his UK 6 Division HQ.

In Nad-e-Ali, British commanders created the conditions for success by working through Afghan leaders to reassure locals that ISAF-ANSF were

‘coming to stay’ and that ‘life would be better’ under the Afghan government. TFH also sent a clear message to insurgents that ISAF-ANSF was going to arrive in force. There have been criticisms in the press that operational security was compromised by messaging the operation in advance to insurgents. But this tactic was most successful in causing Taliban field commanders to flee in advance, thus preventing the insurgents from presenting an organised defence. It was also necessary to win over local support for the operation.

The offensive in North Nad-e-Ali centred on simultaneous helicopter assaults directly on top of two key insurgent strongholds. The manner in which the insurgent defence collapsed, following softening up by special forces and influence operations, suggests that the Taliban are not as resilient and tactically adaptive as generally portrayed.

Report Scope and Methodology

This report assesses the British military contribution to Operation *Moshtarak*. This is actually a set of major operations by ISAF Regional Command (South) – henceforth, RC(S) – to clear insurgents and strengthen governance in Central Helmand, and the area in and around Kandahar City. The British military effort has focused on clearing the Nad-e-Ali District in Central Helmand under Phases One and Two of *Moshtarak*. Phase Two also involved a major US Marine Corps offensive to clear insurgents from Marjah, which is in the South of Nad-e-Ali. Phase Three of *Moshtarak* (now called *Hamkari*), to create

the security conditions to improve governance in Kandahar City, shall begin shortly.

This study combines analysis of documents, interviews, and observation in the field. I reviewed plans, orders, intelligence and post operation reports by RC(S), and Task Force Helmand (TFH) and its component battlegroups (BGs), for Operation *Moshtarak*. I also looked at a more select range of plans and reports for the major preceding operations in Nad-e-Ali (*Tor Shpah*, *Panchai Palang*, and *Sond Chara*). Post-operation reports rarely capture the full extent of friction in the conduct of operations. Accordingly, I interviewed military commanders, planners, intelligence officers, mentors, civilian stabilisation officials and Afghan stakeholders. Finally, I visited a number of locations – Nad-e-Ali District Centre, RC(S), Task Force Helmand (TFH) HQ, the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, the headquarters of the ANA 205 Corps and Helmand brigade (3/215 Brigade), and the Helmand Governor’s Office – to gain a first-hand impression of progress in Helmand in the aftermath of *Moshtarak*.*

* This report contains redacted references. ‘Doc-Order’ refers to plans, operation orders, and directives. ‘Doc-POR’ refers to post operation reports and presentations, and intelligence briefs. Interview subjects are only identified by institution – TFH, RC(S), USMC, HPRT, ANSF and GIRoA. Full identification of interviewees and official documents are available in a classified version of this report, which is available from the British Army’s Land Warfare Centre to those with appropriate security clearance.

Operation *Moshtarak* is the most recent major push by ISAF forces in Southern Afghanistan, and the first major test of the new population-centric approach introduced by the Commander of ISAF (COMISAF), General Stanley McChrystal. Accordingly, this report discusses what *Moshtarak* reveals about the effectiveness of ISAF command and the character of current ISAF counter-insurgency practice. The bulk of this report then explores in some detail how British forces conducted the ‘Shape’, ‘Clear’ and ‘Hold’ of North Nad-e-Ali.[†] The report concludes by identifying four key lessons from *Moshtarak*

[†] UK and US counter-insurgency doctrine both emphasise the ‘clear-hold-build’ sequence of operations. ‘Clear’ is the tactical mission to eliminate or eject insurgents from the area of operations. ‘Hold’ involves restoring government authority, protecting the population, and creating the security infrastructure in the area of operations. ‘Build’ centres on winning the consent and support of the population, mostly through influence operations and military support to development and reconstruction. See Army Code 71876, *British Army Field Manual Countering Insurgency*, Vol. 1, Part 10 (London: Ministry of Defence, October 2009), pp. 4.14–4.16; US Army/US Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2007), pp. 174–82. UK doctrine including the counter-insurgency army field manual, also emphasises the prior phase of ‘Shape’, which involves kinetic and non-kinetic activities to influence the enemy and the population in preparation for the clear and hold phases. See also Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Development, Concepts and Doctrine), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40, *Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution* (London: Ministry of Defence, November 2009) A4 edition, pp. 192–98.

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Phase Two for the ISAF campaign. Of course, the US Marine-led offensive in Marjah has attracted most attention in the United States, and so I start-off with some brief observations on this aspect of Operation *Moshtarak*.

The US Marines and Marjah

This report examines the success of the British-led operation in Nad-e-Ali. Progress has been slower in the US Marine-led operation in Marjah for entirely understandable reasons, discussed below. Hence, this report does not seek to suggest that the British Army is somehow better at COIN than the US Marine Corps; far from it. There is abundant evidence that through the hard, testing campaigns of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marine Corps and Army have become very good at COIN.³ Moreover, in my interviews with many dozens of British officers (for this study and other research), there is universal appreciation for US COIN doctrine and practice, and for the US military partnership in Afghanistan.

The bottom-line is that the US Marines took on a far harder task. Before the Marines went in, Marjah was bandit country, under Taliban rule for the past two years and before that under the control of drug barons. Little was known by ISAF about the human terrain and insurgent disposition in Marjah. In contrast, ISAF and Afghan security forces (ANSF) have gradually extended Afghan government (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan – GIROA) control in Nad-e-Ali for the past eighteen months, and over this time public services and infrastructure have been developed with the support of the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team. Thus, in Operation *Moshtarak*, British and Afghan forces pushed into north Nad-e-Ali with excellent knowledge of the enemy force, with the consent of the local population, and the active support of district government. Rapid progress was hoped for and achieved in Nad-e-Ali. Equally, slower progress in Marjah is entirely to be expected.

In any case, the issue is not the extent to which this or that military ‘gets COIN’, but rather the extent to which individual commanders at all levels – division, brigade, battalion/battlegroup, and company – do so. This point was underlined when I spent three

days with 2nd Battalion, the 8th US Marines in Garmsir District in Helmand, in October 2009. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Christian Cabaniss most certainly ‘got COIN.’ He correctly understood that ‘security is only shaping, it isn’t decisive. Delivery of government is decisive.’⁴ Hence, the integration between the 2/8 Marines and the District Stabilisation Team was seamless. Moreover, the 2/8 command team treated the Afghans as true partners. The *shura* to finalise the security plan for the (eventually aborted) second round of the Afghan Presidential election was clearly Afghan-led; Lieutenant Colonel Cabaniss’s interjections were confined to asking, ‘how can we support this?’ I also witnessed an Afghan-led justice *shura* which Cabaniss let decide the fate of eight men caught red-handed planting an improvised explosive device (IED); a traditional form of bail was agreed. What Lieutenant Colonel Cabaniss and his command team understood was that successful partnership with the Afghans depended on personal relationships, not formal processes. The constant friendly banter between the US Marines, and Afghan army and police officers, was genuine and crucial. This was perfect COIN in practice.

Understandably, much attention in the American media has been focused on Marjah. This report provides the wider context of Operation *Moshtarak*. When Nad-e-Ali as a whole is taken into account, the progress of Operation *Moshtarak* begins to look a lot more positive.

ISAF Command and COIN Practice

Overall

Operation *Moshtarak* shows that in Southern Afghanistan, ISAF is practising what it preaches – i.e., a political-led, population-centric COIN campaign in full partnership with Afghan security forces. Furthermore, there is clear evidence of the effectiveness of Commander ISAF (COMISAF) and Regional Command (South) (RC(S)) direction in shaping these campaign characteristics.

Improved ISAF Command

Operation *Moshtarak* occurred in the context of a reinvigorated ISAF Command under U.S. General Stanley McChrystal. As the new COMISAF,

McChrystal has sought to shift ISAF to a strategy that is political-led, population-centric, and more fully in partnership with ANSF. The evidence from Operation *Moshtarak* suggests that COMISAF has been successful in this endeavour. General McChrystal has also sought to improve unity of effort across ISAF, and to this end he established a new three-star command, ISAF Joint Command. 'The McChrystal Effect' has been widely reported, and indeed is palpable in ISAF HQ.⁵

Less noted has been the invigoration of RC(S) under the command of British Major General Nick Carter. Command of RC(S) rotates between the British, Canadian, Dutch and American militaries. From 1 November 2009 to 31 October 2010, it is the British turn to command RC(S). Major General Carter formed a multinational command with the core staff provided by his own 6th Division HQ. In this context, it is significant that 6th Division was designed for this task; it was established in April 2008 specifically to provide a two-star deployable HQ for multinational command. From its inception, this new HQ prepared for command of RC(S). As one senior staff officer observed: 'with 6th Division in York, you had a team of people who woke up to a daily diet of SITREPS (situation reports) from [the Afghanistan] theatre.'⁶ Prior to the arrival of Major General Carter, RC(S) had little impact in the campaign in Helmand beyond its role in allocating regional air assets and the Regional Battlegroup.⁷ As soon as Major General Carter took charge of RC(S), he exerted higher command over the task forces operating in the South.⁸ He determined when, how and with what resources ISAF would clear and hold North Nad-e-Ali and Marjah. The initial parameters along these lines were thrashed out between RC(S), TFH and Task Force Leatherneck (TFL – based on the 2nd US Marine Expeditionary Brigade) planners in late December. A key decision was whether to conduct the TFH operation in North Nad-e-Ali and TFL operation in Marjah sequentially or simultaneously. It was COMRC(S) who decided on the simultaneous course of action in order to increase pressure on the Taliban in Central Helmand and prevent insurgent displacement from Marjah into North Nad-e-Ali or vice versa.⁹ As discussed later, COMRC(S) has also

exercised firm command in ensuring compliance with COMISAF's directives on partnering with ANSF and reducing civilian casualties.

Political-led Campaign

In his Initial Strategic Assessment of August 2009, General McChrystal noted that the Taliban were pursuing a primarily political campaign against the Afghan government. ISAF and the wider international community were understandably focused on the Taliban's military campaign, but actually it was the growth of Taliban shadow government which presented the greatest threat to the Afghan state.¹⁰ Under General McChrystal's direction, ISAF has shifted its strategy to prioritise the promotion of Afghan governance. At a strategic level, this is evident in ISAF Joint Command's direct support to the new Afghan District Delivery Program.¹¹

In Operation *Moshtarak*, the political-led character of the campaign was evident, both in the level of ISAF engagement with Afghan national, provincial and district authorities in the lead up to and during the operation, and in the emphasis on rapid establishment of sustainable district governance in North Nad-e-Ali and Marjah. Operation *Moshtarak* was the first major offensive by ISAF that had an 'Afghan trigger.' Indeed, D-day for Operation *Moshtarak* Phase Two was delayed by one day, awaiting Presidential authorisation.¹² At the provincial level, COMRC(S) made Governor Mangal the 'centrepiece of COIN'; from the start, the plan was developed in full consultation with Governor Mangal, and it was he and his ANSF team who briefed the plan to President Karzai.¹³

At the tactical level, the TFH approach to operations was heavily influenced by the experience of the Nad-e-Ali Battlegroup in working with the district governor, Habibullah. As the commanding officer of Nad-e-Ali Battlegroup recounted, 'we asked the district governor to identify the most important villages, the most important routes, and what would define normalcy [in our area of operations], and these three things became our objectives.'¹⁴ There is also extensive evidence, discussed below, of the role of Nad-e-Ali leaders in the Shape phase

of *Moshtarak* and that, as per COMRC(S) direction, primacy was given to governance in the execution of *Moshtarak* so as to ensure 'governance is at the tip of the spear.'¹⁵ Thus, of the eighteen key indicators of success in Nad-e-Ali and Marjah still being tracked by RC(S) HQ, the first six indicators concern competent and representative district governance. Major General Carter is clear that these are the critical indicators, and far more important to success than the classic metrics of ANSF numbers and quality, and freedom of movement.¹⁶

Population-centric COIN

The population-centric approach to COIN is articulated in COMISAF's Strategic Guidance and elaborated in COMISAF's Tactical Directive. The Tactical Directive is unambiguous in stating that 'Gaining and maintaining [the support of the population] must be our overriding operational imperative.'¹⁷ To this end, it provides clear direction to ensure that ISAF use of force is restrained and disciplined.¹⁸ The objective is to 'protect the people' from violence from whatever source, ISAF, ANSF or insurgent.¹⁹ This objective is declared the Main Effort in COMRC(S)'s Operational Order for *Moshtarak*. In his Direction to Task Force commanders for *Moshtarak* Phase Two, COMRC(S) further reminded them of the restrictions in COMISAF's Tactical Guidance, and identifies 'the prize in COIN' as 'the trust and confidence of the people.'²⁰ Whilst not to underplay the importance of General McChrystal's direction (which has been vital to the ISAF-wide effort), it should be noted that British forces have been practising population-centric COIN in Helmand since late 2007.²¹ In this sense, COMISAF and COMRC(S) were collectively pushing against an opening door with the British in Helmand. Accordingly, 11 Brigade adopted a policy of 'courageous restraint.'²² Testimony from TFH commanders confirms an approach more focused on engaging with the local community than engaging the enemy in battle. As the commanding officer of the Nad-e-Ali Battlegroup put it, 'Our business was to work with the people. If we had to fight our way to work, we did it. But our business was not to fight.'²³

Partnership with Afghan Authorities and Security Forces

Under McChrystal's direction, ISAF has adopted a much deeper approach to partnering with the ANSF. Where previously ISAF selectively 'partnered' with the Afghan National Army, in the narrow sense of joining forces for particular operations, McChrystal directed that ISAF permanently partner with the ANSF at all levels: 'from Government ministries down to platoon level.' With 'embedded partnering', ISAF and the ANSF are to merge as a Combined Force, and to 'live, train, plan, control and execute operations together.'²⁴ For *Moshtarak*, COMRC(S) identified partnership with ANSF as 'vital ground.'²⁵ As discussed below, this was reflected in the most ambitious partnering construct yet attempted by TFH, which has proven problematic in implementation, but it did produce some benefits and also demonstrated a commitment to partnering by 11 Brigade.

The Shape: Talking Our Way In

TFH's concept of operations for *Moshtarak* was to 'erode insurgent will and capacity to fight' through a combination of physical and psychological pressure in the Shape phase. The intent was to 'write down insurgent capability to the point that the actual clearance is anti-climatic.'²⁶ In the event, the Clear was indeed anti-climatic with an 'exceptionally muted response' from insurgents to the Combined Force offensive in North Nad-e-Ali. Taliban commanders fled North Nad-e-Ali ahead of D-day, leaving behind 'dislocated and confused low level fighters' who only presented 'small sporadic contacts' before going to ground.²⁷ This undoubtedly contributed to the remarkable lack of civilian casualties in North Nad-e-Ali during Operation *Moshtarak*.

The Shape phase involved a fair amount of kinetic activity. The Nad-e-Ali Battlegroup (1st Battalion Grenadier Guards) conducted a major operation in December 2009 (*Tor Shpah*) to clear insurgents from Char-e-Mirza, Noorzo Kalay and Zarghun Kalay. This operation pushed the insurgents into the Chah-e-Anjir Triangle in North Nad-e-Ali in preparation for *Moshtarak*. In January and February 2010, special forces targeted the insurgent leadership,

and the Combined Force also conducted precision disruption of insurgent operations and internal lines of communication.

However, more noteworthy and crucial to the Shape phase were non-kinetic activities. TFH engaged in extensive 'messaging' in advance of the Clear phase to reassure the local population that the operation would improve their lives and that the Combined Force was coming to stay, and to impress upon the insurgents that ISAF and the ANSF would arrive in overwhelming force. 11 Brigade notes that critical to the success of this messaging was a 'comprehensive FIND.' TFH put considerable effort into identifying key local leaders to engage during the Shape phase. Special forces and the Influence Cell in TFH played key roles in finding and engaging village elders in contested areas. Even more significant were the roles played by the district governor and deputy district governor in reaching out to local leaders.²⁸

Planning for the Shape phase in *Moshtarak* built on the experience of the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards in Nad-e-Ali. Within weeks of arriving in their area of operations, the Grenadiers were experimenting with 'consent-based CLEAR.'²⁹ In Operation *Tor Sara*, the Battlegroup cleared Shin Kalay with the support of village elders; as the Battlegroup commanding officer later recalled, the operation essentially involved 'talking our way into Shin Kalay.'³⁰ The subsequent Battlegroup operation to clear north of Nad-e-Ali District Centre up to Noorzo Kalay, Operation *Tor Shpah*, combined all the elements that later were to characterise TFH's approach to *Moshtarak*. Kinetic operations put pressure on insurgent leadership in advance of D-day, and enabled the Battlegroup to identify insurgent logistic and command and control nodes for targeting during the Clear phase. Alongside this kinetic activity was 'energetic engagement by the district governor to inform elders that ANSF/ISAF were committing overwhelming force to clear the area.' At the centrepiece of the Clear phase were two simultaneous night aviation assaults right on top of insurgent strongholds. This in combination with the multi-dimensional Shape caused the insurgents 'to withdraw without staging any form of defence.'³¹ Operation *Tor Shpah* resulted in

an estimated 150 insurgents being cleared from an area with a local population of approximately 5,000, without taking any civilian casualties.³² *Tor Shpah* demonstrated to TFH HQ the effectiveness of engaging local leaders in advance of the Clear phase, and of intimidating the Taliban and targeting their internal lines of communication.³³ Indeed, COMRC(S) held up *Tor Shpah* as a clear example of how he wanted *Moshtarak* to proceed.³⁴

The Clear: Taliban Tactical Fragility

The Taliban are widely considered to be a highly resilient and adaptive enemy. Operation *Moshtarak* suggests that insofar as the Taliban possess these qualities, they may be so more at the strategic than the tactical level.

As noted above, Operation *Tor Shpah* revealed a number of key tactical weaknesses in the enemy force. Insurgent command and control was easy to overload and confuse, especially as the Taliban leaders were not commanding from the front and so senior insurgent commanders lacked situation awareness. The Grenadier Guards Battlegroup also learned the importance of CASEVAC (casualty evacuation) to insurgent fighters, and the weakness of insurgent combat logistics, both of which depended on insurgents' internal lines of communication. By threatening insurgent leadership and internal lines of communication, the Grenadier Guards were able to apply highly effective physical and psychological pressure on insurgents in the Shape phase of *Tor Shpah*.³⁵ The insurgents were similarly targeted by TFH in the Shape phase of Operation *Moshtarak*.

The Clear phase of Operation *Moshtarak* involved rapid insertion of a 1,200 strong Combined Force into Marjah and North Nad-e-Ali in just two hours (between 0400-0600 hours on 13 February). As already noted, the insurgents failed to present an organised defence in Nad-e-Ali; most foreign Taliban fighters fled, whilst local Taliban fighters melted back into their local communities. The lack of a Taliban defence of Nad-e-Ali suggests an inability to adapt to ISAF tactics. The Clear phase for *Moshtarak*, with the multiple helicopter assaults by ISAF directly onto the key insurgent strongholds,

proceeded in the same manner as the Clear in Operation *Tor Shpah* just two months before. It might be argued that the insurgents had no need to adapt in that, given they were facing overwhelming force, they always intended to surrender Nad-e-Ali in order to preserve their fighters.³⁶ However, there is clear evidence that insurgent leaders were thrown into complete disarray by the Combined Force offensive.³⁷ In other words, this was not a planned, let alone orderly, retreat.

It is important to put Taliban capability in context. Whilst the insurgents may not be as tactically adaptable and resilient as some might think, they do not have to be that capable to achieve their main intended effects: to undermine GIRoA governance and authority through intimidation of the local population, and to disrupt ISAF and ANSF freedom of movement. As one senior ISAF intelligence officer put it: ‘technically the Taliban don’t need to be brilliant. When you’re a guerrilla force, it is easy to cause trouble.’³⁸ There is also the broader issue of preventing the Taliban from re-generating force to threaten government control of new cleared territory. This underlines the importance of government and development to remove incentives for local Taliban to return to the fight, as well as the importance of renew attempts at reintegration and reconciliation to turn tactical defeat of the Taliban into a sustainable peace with the Taliban.

The Hold: Mixed Results on Embedded Partnering
TFH’s concept for the Clear and the Hold was ‘to create a series of partnered company [areas of operation].’ Each area of operation would comprise one ISAF, one Afghan National Army and one Afghan police company.³⁹ As the plan for *Moshtarak* developed, this became known as the ‘Rule of Three.’ Citing the ‘Petraeus algorithm’, TFH HQ identified the necessary COIN ratio to be twenty-five counter-insurgents per 1,000 population, and this produced an imperative to generate more friendly forces. The Rule of Three evolved in response to this imperative. In each area of operations, three companies of 100 covered a population of roughly 12,000. In conception, the Rule of Three represents the most ambitious attempt at embedded partnering by any British

brigade. With partnered company HQ’s co-located and company commanders ‘living, planning, executing and controlling operations together’, it also promised full implementation of COMISAF’s equally ambitious Partnering Directive.⁴⁰

The Rule of Three also grew out of the lessons of Operation *Panchai Palang*, the major operation by 19 Brigade in the summer of 2009 to clear the Taliban out of Nad-e-Ali and Babaji, during which ISAF units met their Afghan National Army partners for the first time just before boarding helicopters for the aviation assault into Nad-e-Ali. In Operation *Moshtarak*, the partnered companies assembled at Camp Bastion (with arriving ANA units being greeted by their TFH partners) and conducted training in preparation for the operation.

The major challenge for the Rule of Three was in generating sufficient numbers of useable Afghan police. The existing Afghan National Police in Nad-e-Ali were highly corrupt and detested by the local population. Thus, for Operation *Moshtarak*, police companies were provided by some 450 Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) augmented by an additional 150 officers from the Counter-Narcotics Police; ANCOP and Counter-Narcotics Police are generally more professional and hence respected than local Afghan National Police. The plan was to replace the ANCOP companies with new graduates from the interim Helmand Police Training Centre (iHPTC) as they came on stream. In this, TFH were again building on the experience of Operation *Tor Shpah*, when the Nad-e-Ali Battlegroup got around local ‘deep rooted distrust’ of ANP by using ANCOP to police the newly created protected communities.⁴¹ Police training has been problematic for some time in Helmand. The EUPOL police programme in Helmand had stalled by October 2009, and in any case was focused on producing constabulary instead of gendarmerie.⁴² In response, the commander of TFH, Brigadier James Cowan, formed the Afghan National Police Development Headquarters and established the iHPTC.⁴³ The emphasis was on producing paramilitary rather than community officers. By the onset of Operation *Moshtarak*, the iHPTC had graduated 450 officers. Esprit de corps was to be

built by training and deploying the new Afghan National Police as whole companies. New police were to be kept clean by rotating them through checkpoints and the company patrol base each month.⁴⁴ The evidence from Nad-e-Ali suggests that the newly trained Afghan National Police graduating from the iHPTC are slightly better than the old ones. Structural problems, in the Ministry of Interior and in the quality of the local recruitment pool, remain largely unresolved. Moreover, the junior officers – the NCOs and company commanders – remain unchanged and untrained. Thus, discipline at Afghan National Police-manned checkpoints is still poor. On the positive side, Nad-e-Ali has a new, highly committed and capable, District Chief of Police who is trying to replace the worst of his junior officers.⁴⁵

The results of the Rule of Three were mixed. The partnering of ISAF and Afghan National Army companies in Camp Bastion was a huge improvement on past preparations for major offensives.⁴⁶ But the degree and depth of partnering varied across Helmand. Within Nad-e-Ali, only two of the five Afghan National Army companies were partnered by the time of transfer of authority for TFH from 11 to 4 Brigade.⁴⁷ Crucially, the constraint was not the willingness of the Grenadier Guards to embrace partnering (quite the opposite), but rather ANSF numbers, especially Afghan National Army. As noted, the Rule of Three was predicated on three companies of roughly 100 each: one ISAF, one Afghan National Army and one Afghan National Police. British ground-holding companies are 120 strong. Afghan National Army companies are 100 strong on paper, but typically half of these will be on leave or have deserted. Thus the actual company strength is typically between forty-five and fifty-five men.⁴⁸ The bottom line is that there simply is not enough Afghan National Army to partner up one-on-one with ISAF. This position is accepted by COMRC(S) who concludes that 'there aren't enough ANSF' to sustain the Rule of Three, and so one 'can't afford to be fussy' about who one partners with.⁴⁹ It would appear that Brigadier Cowan was being 'intentionally ambitious.' He did not expect the Rule of Three to work perfectly, but he felt it necessary to push the envelope on partnering.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, given the ANA force-generation problems, the Rule of Three was pushing things too far.

The character of embedded partnering also varied at the higher command level. For Operation *Moshtarak*, RC(S) forward deployed a command centre into the Police HQ in Lashkar Gah. COMRC(S) and his staff shared the command centre with the commander and staff of 205 Corps, and the Provincial Police Chief's. Initially, this forward deployment was about strategic communications; to better enable COMRC(S) to support the task force commanders and provincial governor should there be a disastrous event (such as a downed troop helicopter or mass civilian casualty event).⁵¹ But it quickly exceeded all expectations and became a genuine process for developing integrated command. By day two, Major General Carter and his staff had 'gone back to basics', and abandoned PowerPoint and computers in favour of maps and whiteboards so as to facilitate co-operation with their ANSF partners.⁵² COMRC(S)'s impression is that the 205 Corps commander and staff grew in confidence and increasingly owned the process of partnered command. Perhaps not surprisingly, this is also the view of 205 Corps.⁵³ But it was confirmed by the 205 Corps Coalition Mentor Team, who witnessed the process and saw how the Chief G3 for 205 Corps, Colonel Hayotallah, became the Chief CJ3 for the combined HQ, and the Afghan National Army Chief of Special Operations Forces did the combined force special forces briefing at combined planning sessions.⁵⁴ This was a two-way learning process. COMRC(S) readily admits that RC(S) HQ also grew in its understanding of how to work with its Afghan National Army partners in a combined HQ. Again this was confirmed by the 205 Corps Coalition Mentor Team who observed that the combined HQ 'went from a space divided, here is the ANA bit, the ANP bit, the ISAF bit, to here is the G2 bit, the G3 bit, and so on.'⁵⁵

Operation *Moshtarak* also involved TFH HQ partnering with a new Afghan National Army brigade from 205 Corps. This brigade, which was named after its commander, Colonel Sherin Shah, and based in Camp Shorabak, forwarded deployed

the brigade commander and a small team to be co-located with TFH. However, unlike RC(S) and 205 Corps, TFH did not physically share a command centre with Colonel Sherin Shah's brigade; instead a separate command tent was set up for the Afghan National Army brigade next to the TFH HQ. Where the RC(S)-205 Corps command centre was a hive of activity, there was no ISAF presence and little going on in the Afghan National Army brigade forward HQ.⁵⁶ However, in fairness to TFH, their Afghan army partners arrived very late and wholly under-strength. The new Afghan National Army brigade was formed about two weeks before D-day for Operation *Moshtarak*. Not only was this very late, it also meant that Colonel Sherin Shah was more focused on the business of getting his brigade up and running than on integrating with TFH. Moreover, whereas Afghan National Army brigades should have a headquarters staff of ninety, Colonel Sherin Shah's brigade only had thirteen.⁵⁷

Crucial, as well, to the Hold phase was a civil-military partnership between ISAF and the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team. The provincial reconstruction team had been for many years enabling the development of governance, infrastructure and services in Nad-e-Ali. Indeed, these lines of Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team activity actually provided crucial, long-term Shape in the area of operations. Hence, even before Operation *Tor Shpah*, Nad-e-Ali already had a good district governor, a reasonably representative (though slightly dysfunctional) district community council, and on-going programmes of infrastructure and public services development.⁵⁸ Besides from expertise in development, the provincial reconstruction team has two major strengths over its military partners. First, it brings a long-term perspective. Military commands are naturally inclined to push the pace of operations in order to achieve objectives and move on. The British military campaign in Helmand has really been a series of six-month campaigns, as this is the length of tour of the brigades that deploy as TFH. The creation of three 'continuity posts' – the DComd, SO 1 ANSF, and SO 1 Influence – has improved continuity of knowledge between task forces, but more could probably be done to improve continuity of

command at the campaign level.⁵⁹ Because of their development background and longer-tour lengths (typically twelve to twenty-four months), Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team staff are naturally inclined to take the longer perspective. Second, the provincial reconstruction team is focused on enabling and working through Afghan governance structures. As noted earlier, military commands are now focusing on this, but the point is this is core provincial reconstruction team business.

Moshtarak presented a major planning challenge for the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team. Two district stabilisation teams were involved in *Moshtarak* – one in the British area of operations (North Nad-e-Ali) and one in the USMC area of operations (Marjah). Both were well integrated in the respective task forces, and this enabled effective synchronisation of military operations and stabilisation activities on the ground. Planning at the higher level, with TFH, Task Force Leatherneck (the USMC task force), and RC(S), proved more challenging, however. The military commands had very large planning staffs that would each generate large demands for information from their partners. In contrast, as a far smaller organisation focused on delivery, the PRT lacked a strategic planning cell and was overwhelmed with the demand for information. As the DComd TFH (who is double-hatted as one of the PRT deputies) explained, the military commands were like three big cogs clicking around, and with the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team you had 'a small cog in the middle which didn't have enough teeth.'⁶⁰ In response, the provincial reconstruction team requested a surge planning capacity which was provided by the HQ element of the Theatre Reserve Battalion. Integrated civil-military planning was especially effective between TFH and the provincial reconstruction team, which is hardly surprising as given the two are co-located in the same forward-operation base and, moreover, the TFH J5 planner post has been located in the actual Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team command room since 2008. In contrast, there appears to have been poor integration of planning with the USMC; the view from the provincial reconstruction team was that the USMC planning for post-Clear stabilisation activities in Marjah was 'very last

minute.⁶¹ Following *Moshtarak*, the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team has created a small two-person strategic planning cell. Were it to face another multi-task force operation on the scale of *Moshtarak*, it would again seek surge planning capacity.⁶² The experience of *Moshtarak* (in that the Theatre Reserve Battalion integrated well into the provincial reconstruction team) suggests that this is a sensible solution.

Key Lessons

Manage Expectations – Locally and at Home

Moshtarak demonstrates the importance of managing the expectations of stakeholders – leaders and ordinary people – in the area of operations and back home. The message that ISAF and the GIRoA are ‘coming to stay,’ and that things would be better under the Afghan government, was critical to ensuring local support for the operation. The local Taliban (as distinct from foreign fighters) are also stakeholders of a sort, and here too the message that ISAF and the ANSF would arrive in overwhelming force appears to have been most effective in discouraging them from presenting an armed defence.

Just as critical was the messaging back home to explain to the political establishment and the British public the purpose and risks of the operation. The intention was for *Moshtarak* ‘to be a common word [back home] by the time of the operation.’⁶³ This approach built on the lessons of Operation *Panchai Palang*, where the home audience had not been prepared for a summer of hard fighting in Central Helmand and rising UK casualties. This time it was decided to explain in some detail how the Combined Force was shaping the conditions for an anti-climatic Clear. Thus, on 4 February the UK Ministry of Defence provided a detailed briefing to London-based media on the approach being taken to Operation *Moshtarak*.⁶⁴ The head of the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team also returned to London to brief the policy-makers in person on Operation *Moshtarak* in order ‘to make sure Whitehall was prepared.’⁶⁵

Be Patient – Both Tactically and Operationally

By tactical patience, I mean restraint in the use of

force. Of course, this has been central to British Army COIN doctrine since the early 1920s⁶⁶ In Operation *Moshtarak*, it was captured in the concept of ‘courageous restraint’, which became a watchword for TFH. Brigadier Cowan is clear that courageous restraint does not mean being passive in the face of insurgent attacks. Rather, it means using manoeuvre instead of firepower to defeat the insurgents. In adopting this approach, TFH were responding to the spirit as well as the letter of COMISAF’s Tactical Directive. It is to their considerable credit that there were no civilian casualties in the British area of operations for *Moshtarak*. By now it is well understood that civilian casualties present a strategic threat to the ISAF campaign. Moreover, it is reasonable to expect that the insurgents will seek to exploit this vulnerability. Indeed, the GIRoA claims to have evidence (i.e., accounts from civilians in Nad-e-Ali) that the Taliban adopted tactics during *Moshtarak* designed to force ISAF into causing civilian casualties.⁶⁷ Following *Moshtarak*, COMRC(S) reiterated to task force commanders in the south the absolute imperative of preventing civilian casualties, and of reducing collateral damage. In response, Brigadier Richard Felton (the new commander of TFH) has adopted a policy of ‘ZERO civilian casualties’ and this is reflected in TFH rules of engagement.⁶⁸

Moshtarak also shows how operational patience pays off. *Moshtarak* has shown remarkable progress so far in North Nad-e-Ali. Most active insurgents have been pushed out of Nad-e-Ali, to the desert across the Nahr-e-Bughra canal, with some remaining in small areas to the far south and north of the district. The number of significant violent events in Nad-e-Ali has fallen to 15 per cent of that before Operation *Moshtarak*.⁶⁹ Freedom of movement for civilians and security forces within the district has dramatically improved. The district has an effective governor, and relations between the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army have greatly improved.⁷⁰ Most important of all, as a key indicator of progress, there was excellent local turnout (some 3,000) for at the three election *shuras* for the District Community Council, and a new, enlarged and more representative body was elected on 12 May.⁷¹ A survey by Radio Nad-

e-Ali found that 95 per cent of callers felt that life was 'better or very much better' since Operation *Moshtarak*.⁷²

Contrast this with Marjah. From the beginning, the local population was doubtful that ISAF and the ANSF were coming to stay.⁷³ The US Marines and their ANSF partners have stayed, but they have been unable to prevent insurgents from re-infiltrating and intimidating the local population. This is hindering the establishment district governance and basic public services, and undermining the cash-for-work programme which is intended to win over the local population (including former local Taliban).⁷⁴ Progress has been more rapid in Nad-e-Ali because the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team has been supporting governance and development in Nad-e-Ali for over a year. Indeed, the British-led offensive to push the Taliban out of Nad-e-Ali and extend government control started in late 2008 with Operation *Sond Chara*. As one senior provincial reconstruction team officer noted: 'What SOND CHARA did was to establish a lodgement, a district government and district stabilisation team in Nad-e-Ali from day one, and enough security to develop with a core of elders the conditions for later success.'⁷⁵ *Sond Chara* and the operations that followed also put the Taliban under increasing military pressure in Nad-e-Ali. In the summer of 2009, 19 Brigade launched a task-force level operation, Operation *Panchai Palang*, which served to inject further military momentum into Central Helmand and clear the Taliban from their stronghold in Babaji, an area to the northeast of Nad-e-Ali. *Panchai Palang* was synchronised with Operation *Khanjar*, a major USMC push in the south of Helmand into the districts of Nawa, Garmsir and Khanashin. The British had previously been holding Garmsir and so this synchronisation released British forces to support *Panchai Palang*.⁷⁶ Operation *Tor Shpah* further extended and deepened ISAF and Afghan government control north of the district centre. Thus by the time of *Moshtarak*, the Taliban had already been pushed into the northern and southern corners of Nad-e-Ali, and district governance was already well established.

The rapid building of local trust and establishment of governance is not realistic for Marjah. Indeed,

the situation in Marjah was far worse than realised by RC(S) planners. There had been no ISAF or GIROA presence in Marjah since it was taken by the Taliban in 2008. Thus ISAF had little knowledge of what was going on inside Marjah. It was assumed that Marjah was a relatively affluent (with narcotics revenue) and well developed area. When they pushed into Marjah, the US Marines found that it was mostly populated by poor, disenfranchised, non-land-owning farmers. The need for development is far greater than anticipated, at the same time the downtrodden population are understandably slow to support the Afghan government, and are easy prey for Taliban intimidation.⁷⁷ In short, progress in stabilisation and development tends to follow a J-curve trajectory. Early operations and activities lay the foundations for a success that takes time to come to fruition. It took the British around eighteen months to stabilise Nad-e-Ali. Progress in Marjah ought to be measured along a similar timeline.

Security First, Governance Foremost

The centre of gravity – the single most important thing that will ensure success – for the ISAF-GIROA campaign is governance. After years of abusive rule under warlords and the Taliban, ordinary Afghans crave decent governance. Fortunately, Helmand has one of the best governors in Afghanistan, in Mohammed Gulab Mangal. Supported by the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, Mangal's office has grown in size and capability. Key now is district governance. Indeed, across Afghanistan, improving governance in eighty key districts has become a major effort for ISAF Joint Command, through its support to the Afghan Independent Directorate of Local Governance's District Delivery Program.⁷⁸ COMRC(S) is clear that governance is his main effort, and hence the metrics of campaign progress most important to him concern district governance. Here too, things look most positive in Helmand. There is effective and representative district governance in Nad-e-Ali, Nawa and Garmsir. The success of *Moshtarak* also empowered Mangal, enabling him to replace the corrupt district governors of Sangin and Musa Qala.

British commanders have long understood that the campaign in Helmand will be won by the

governance and development lines of operation. Indeed this logic was captured in Britain's original Joint Helmand Plan formulated in Helmand and Whitehall by an inter-agency team of military planners, diplomats and development experts in late 2005. At the same time, it is understood that security is essential for governance and development to improve. From the original ink-spot strategy in 2006, the British approach has been to gradually extend security bubbles around population centres to enable political and economic development in Helmand. The current British effort seeks to create many 'protected communities' linked by improved freedom of movement in central Helmand. Protected communities require persistent presence by security forces in the community itself, with disruptive operations against insurgents in surrounding contested areas. With Operation *Moshtarak*, 11 Brigade greatly increased the number of protected communities within Nad-e-Ali such that almost all major villages are now secure and under government control. 'Continuity'

is to be the main theme of 4 Brigade's tour. Thus, it will consolidate the gains of *Moshtarak*; 'tidying up the edges' in Nad-e-Ali and improving freedom of movement between protected communities throughout the Green Zone.⁷⁹ The prospects for building on the success of *Moshtarak* look most promising.

Professor Theo Farrell is Professor of War in the Modern World in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. He has published numerous books including most recently, as co-editor, A Transatlantic Gap: American Innovations and European Military Change (Stanford University Press, 2010). He has previously conducted a performance review of the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team for the UK Stabilisation Unit (Oct-Nov. 2009), and acted as advisor to COMISAF's Strategic Advisory Group in Kabul (Jan. 2010). Prof. Farrell holds a three-year ESRC-AHRC research fellowship funded under the Research Councils UK 'Global Uncertainties' Program.

NOTES

- ¹ This report contains redacted references. 'Doc-Order' refers to plans, operation orders, and directives. 'Doc-POR' refers to post operation reports and presentations, and intelligence briefs. Interview subjects are only identified by institution – TFH, RC(S), USMC, HPRT, ANSF and GIRoA. Full identification of interviewees and official documents are available in a classified version of this report, which is available from the British Army's Land Warfare Centre to those with appropriate security clearance.
- ² UK and US counter-insurgency doctrine both emphasise the 'clear-hold-build' sequence of operations. 'Clear' is the tactical mission to eliminate or eject insurgents from the area of operations. 'Hold' involves restoring government authority, protecting the population, and creating the security infrastructure in the area of operations. 'Build' centres on winning the consent and support of the population, mostly through influence operations and military support to development and reconstruction. See Army Code 71876, *British Army Field Manual Countering Insurgency*, Vol. 1, Part 10 (London: Ministry of Defence, October 2009), pp. 4.14–4.16; US Army/US Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2007), pp. 174–82. UK doctrine including the counter-insurgency army field manual, also emphasises the prior phase of 'Shape', which involves

kinetic and non-kinetic activities to influence the enemy and the population in preparation for the clear and hold phases. See also Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Development, Concepts and Doctrine), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40, *Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution* (London: Ministry of Defence, November 2009) A4 edition, pp. 192–98.

- ³ David H Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009); James Russell, *Innovation, Transformation and War: U.S. Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa, 2005-07* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).
- ⁴ Interview USMC2.
- ⁵ Observation from visit to ISAF HQ, Kabul (January 2010).
- ⁶ Interview RC(S)1.
- ⁷ Previously under Dutch command, RC(S) was smaller and lacked the capacity, training and inclination for corps-level command. Interview RC(S)11.
- ⁸ Interview TFH1.
- ⁹ Interview TFH2; interview RC(S)12.
- ¹⁰ Commander NATO International Security Assistance Force and US Forces, Afghanistan, 'Commander's Initial

- Assessment,' 30 August 2009, pp. 2-3-2-6.
- ¹¹ Discussions with officials at ISAF Joint Command and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, Kabul, January 2010.
- ¹² It would seem that President Karzai simply assumed that the operation would proceed without his authorisation. He was surprised that McChrystal deferred to sovereign authority. It was the first time a COMISAF had done so and President Karzai had not expected anything different. Interview TFH1.
- ¹³ Interview RC(S)10.
- ¹⁴ Doc-POR11; interview TFH8.
- ¹⁵ Doc-Order6.
- ¹⁶ Interview RC(S)10; interview HPRT6.
- ¹⁷ This is also emphasised in British Army COIN doctrine *op. cit.*, pp. 3-9.
- ¹⁸ Doc-Order5.
- ¹⁹ COMISAF Strategic Guidance.
- ²⁰ Doc-Order6.
- ²¹ Theo Farrell, 'Improving in War: Military Adaptation and the British in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2006-2009,' *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Vol. 33, No. 4, 2010), pp. 567-94.
- ²² Doc-POR1.
- ²³ Doc-POR11. In another presentation at the same debrief the commanding officer of the Combined Force Company in Nahr-e-Seraj, noted that 'we avoided contact [with the enemy] unless absolutely necessary in areas that we could not dominate 24/7.' Doc-POR10.
- ²⁴ Doc-Order12.
- ²⁵ Doc-Order4.
- ²⁶ Doc-Order2.
- ²⁷ Doc-POR3.
- ²⁸ Interview TFH2.
- ²⁹ Doc-POR11.
- ³⁰ Interview TFH3
- ³¹ Doc-POR6.
- ³² Interview TFH2.
- ³³ Interview TFH8.
- ³⁴ Interview with RC(S)13.
- ³⁵ Interview TFH3.
- ³⁶ This is the view of Major General Shiri Zarzai, GOC of the 205 Corps which was the higher Afghan National Army command responsible for Operation *Moshtarak*. Interview ANSF1.
- ³⁷ Doc-POR5; Doc-POR6; interview TFH3.
- ³⁸ Interview RC(S)3.
- ³⁹ Doc-Order2.
- ⁴⁰ Doc-POR1.
- ⁴¹ Doc-POR6.
- ⁴² Discussion with EUPOL training team, Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, Lashkar Gah, Helmand, October 2009.
- ⁴³ Interview TFH4.
- ⁴⁴ Doc-POR1.
- ⁴⁵ Interview GiROA1.
- ⁴⁶ In contrast, US Marine Corps and ANA units met for the first time in Marjah itself, and it took approximately two weeks for them to integrate whilst operations were ongoing. ANATC/Doctrine Directorate, Afghan National Army Lessons Learned Center, 'Helmand Province, Observations from Marjah,' April 2010, p. 5.
- ⁴⁷ Interview TFH5.
- ⁴⁸ Interview TFH4.
- ⁴⁹ Interview RC(S)10.
- ⁵⁰ Interview TFH4.
- ⁵¹ Interview RC(S)11.
- ⁵² Interview RC(S)4.
- ⁵³ Operation *Moshtarak* Phase 2: Observations and Lessons Identified, 205 'ATAL' Corps ANA, April 2010 (PowerPoint briefing).
- ⁵⁴ This is significant because G3 Operations is the most important branch, and SOF is the most sensitive area after G2 Intelligence, in any HQ that is commanding a major operation.
- ⁵⁵ Interview RC(S)10.
- ⁵⁶ This was witnessed by the 205 Corps Coalition Mentor Team. Interview RC(S)7.
- ⁵⁷ Interview TFH4.
- ⁵⁸ I visited and conducted an assessment of Nad-e-Ali district for the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team Mid-Year Performance Review in October 2009.
- ⁵⁹ Some in the British Army have argued for longer-tour lengths for all units in Afghanistan. However, given the strain on Battlegroups and their companies, deployed in austere conditions and conducting a high tempo of challenging operations, extending tour lengths is not only unrealistic, it could well be counter-productive. Completely worn-out troops do not make for great counter-insurgents.
- ⁶⁰ Interview TFH8.
- ⁶¹ Interview HPRT7. That said, the stabilisation advisor for Marjah reports that when he forward deployed to Forward Operating Base Dwyer the week before D-day, he was able to plan stabilisation activities with the Regimental Combat Team HQ. Interview HPRT1.
- ⁶² Interview HPRT6.
- ⁶³ Interview TFH8.
- ⁶⁴ Interview MOD1.
- ⁶⁵ Interview HPRT6.
- ⁶⁶ British Army Field Manual, *op. cit.* p. 1-2. See also Rod

Thornton, 'The British Army and the Origins of its Minimum Force Philosophy,' *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (Vol. 14, No. 2, 2004), pp. 83–106.

⁶⁷ Interview GiROA2.

⁶⁸ Directive from Brigadier RFP Felton ComdTFH to Commanding Officer and Principals, 'REDUCING CIVILIAN CASUALTIES,' 17 April 2001.

⁶⁹ Even allowing for seasonal factors that normally cause a reduction in insurgent activity, especially the poppy harvest, this is still a remarkable decline in significant acts of violence.

⁷⁰ Operational patience is also required given the variable quality of Afghan National Army units. Generally speaking, they are pretty good fighters, and good at detecting IEDs. However, company commanders vary in quality – some are very poor indeed. Logistics are terrible, as is the Afghan Ministry of Defence when it comes to supporting units in the field, and Afghan army units will not act without written orders. ISAF is attempting to mitigate these problems through improved training for junior officers, direct support in the field with logistics, and getting the Afghan Ministries of Defence and of Interior to agree to joint ISAF-Afghan National Army-Afghan National Police orders which can be distributed down the ISAF chain of

command via ISAF COMMS. ANATC/Doctrine Directorate, Afghan National Army Lessons Learned Center, 'Helmand Province, Observations from Marjah,' April 2010, pp. 8, 13; interview RC(S)7; interview TFH10.

⁷¹ Doc-POR16; interview TFH5; HPRT5.

⁷² The survey was conducted between 7-14 May. Of 503 callers, 97 per cent freely answered the question: 'How has your life changed over the last 6 months?' A number of factors may have contributed to public optimism, including, the poppy harvest, wheat seed distribution, but also factors due to Operation *Moshtarak*, such as improved security and district council elections. Doc-POR17.

⁷³ Michael M Philips, 'Progress in Marjah, But Civilian Trust Remains Elusive,' *Wall Street Journal*, 22 February 2010.

⁷⁴ Richard A Opiel, 'Violence Helps Taliban Undo Afghan Gains,' *New York Times*, 3 April 2010.

⁷⁵ Interview HPRT7.

⁷⁶ Interview TFH11.

⁷⁷ Interview RC(S)2; interview HPRT1.

⁷⁸ Discussions with ISAF Joint Command mentors to the IDLG DDP, Kabul, 8-9 January 2010.

⁷⁹ Interview TFH7.