

Securing Marjah for Obama or Afghans?

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K ABUL: Most Afghans are largely worried about survival, security, and how to feed and clothe their families. And they wonder what is really going on in a small district called Marjah in Helmand province, 650 kilometres south of Kabul. They also question the strategic importance, if any at all, of Marjah to the overall situation in Afghanistan, as well as to the much-hyped Operation Moshtarak. Some brush it off as part of an elaborate American publicity stunt to bolster support for the Obama administration's ongoing surge of 30,000 troops, which most Afghans believe is meant to facilitate the eventual draw-down of foreign troops in their country.

Common Afghans also point to other dozens of districts that are completely under Taliban control and independent of Kabul's authority. Nearly 30 of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan are reportedly run by shadow Taliban administrations – at least during the night.

Afghans also remember Taliban pronouncements ahead of Operation Moshtarak that they would not fight pitched battles and will enforce a tactical withdrawal to avoid damage to both civilians and their own forces. Those familiar with the terrain in Helmand also underline that areas like Marjah do not offer any natural refuge or protection to anti-government forces. It is a vast plain; and the Taliban simply abandoned their positions in the area well before the coalition forces began their advance on Marjah.

As for the coalition forces, led by Commander General Stanley McChrystal, Marjah represents a test case for their approach to bring security to Afghanistan, one district at a time. They chose Marjah because, it is argued, it hosted and sheltered "key insurgents". (Interestingly, coalition officials don't invoke the term "terrorists" anymore.) Further, they considered it necessary to disrupt these insurgents and signal the government's resolve against the militants. Coalition forces say the assault on Marjah and surrounding villages, in a province that produces 70 percent of Afghanistan's poppy, could last at least 12 months; but hope that it will clear the way for an advance eastwards towards Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban movement. General McChrystal, quoted by the local and foreign media, said on February 24 that the next target is Kandahar and that ahead of the offensive, two US battalions joined Canadian troops to begin security strategic parts of the city.

A separate brigade, according to *Outlook Afghanistan*, is working to secure roads from the south of Afghanistan to the border with Pakistan.

Smaller than a union council in Pakistan, with a population of less than 30,000, the Marjah district is considered key to defeating the insurgency. While many Afghans in Kabul had heard the name of this district for the first time in the media, the offensive – involving 15,000 US, NATO and Afghan troops – is being mounted with the kind of media hype that gives the impression that the success of the entire US-NATO campaign rests on what happens in Marjah.

Earlier, on February 17, before a gathering of Afghan, Pakistani and international observers in Brussels, former Afghan interior minister Ali Ahmed Jalali had also touted Operation Moshtarak as a decisive assault on the Taliban. It would determine not only the fate of the Afghan ownership of the counter-insurgency effort, but also give Kabul the strength to negotiate with the Taliban, according to Jalali, highlighting that the operation's rationale emanated from within the US establishment, which would like to showcase success in Marjah as a success of the Obama administration.

"In many ways, it is a model for the future; an Afghan-led operation supported by the coalition, deeply engaged with the people," General McChrystal was reported as saying, in the backdrop of official reports that the operation is being largely led by the Afghan National Army and the Afghan police.

Some diplomats in Kabul likened the Marjah operation to the Pakistan Army's Malakand offensive, launched in the first week of May 2009, suggesting that McChrystal was perhaps drawing on the Pakistani counter-insurgency experience. Well before the actual move, the coalition publicised its impending plan to launch an operation in Marjah. Rumours were spread and leaflets containing warnings to the Taliban to withdraw were distributed, as well as appeals to the population to stay clear of "insurgents and their shelters". These leaflets were dropped from the air, a pattern that the Pakistan Army had adopted for its Malakand-Swat operation. This preliminary move revolved around the hope that if the bulk of the Taliban pulled out before the coalition forces moved in, that could minimise casualties and damage to civilians. It would also help establish the "writ of the government" with the help of the local administration, protected by the new police force and under the umbrella of coalition forces.

Almost two weeks into the operation, NATO officials describe the resistance from the Taliban as "determined, formidable but not disjointed", with regular reports and photos of the action being issued either by the forces themselves or by embedded journalists. US and NATO officials also claim that local tribal elders are cooperating with the forces to oust the Taliban from their area.

Regardless of the Afghan government's and coalition commanders' claims, Operation Moshtarak has raised many issues.

First, while it may have been a Taliban stronghold, Marjah has never been the centre of gravity as far as the Taliban are concerned. Investing an unusual amount of energy and resources on such a tiny piece of land, therefore, escaped one's comprehension. Further, Taliban insurgents

rarely hold on to areas and their control of territory is established while being mobile, and is more of a political nature than physical.

Second, key Taliban figures and most of their foot soldiers pulled out much before the operation began. It was also part of the coalition's strategy but this gives rise to the question as to who is resisting the coalition troops, then. Most of the population is out of Marjah and from Nad Ali, the other target town, and given the strength of coalition troops, insurgents would be stupid to hold on to positions in the settlements in this largely flat area.

Third, if the coalition and Afghan government claims were to be accepted, Operation Moshtarak has, for the first time, exposed the Afghan National Army and the Afghan police to a counter-insurgency battle and, if successful, would underline the "Afghan ownership" of this campaign. If the Afghans are at the forefront of the execution of this plan, it is a welcome move forward for Afghan security forces. What is essential, however, is for the security apparatus in the medium- and long-term to fill their ranks with professional, permanent soldiers. The process of developing a professional army needs to be accelerated.

Fourth, local ownership of counter-insurgency is always the pre-requisite for any measurable success. Yet, any counter-insurgency campaign done hastily is not likely to neutralise or mitigate the insurgency. Unfortunately, the Marjah offensive is being seen as part of the US exit strategy. (Though one would assume that a full exit of US troops from Afghanistan does not seem likely.) And that has therefore not only drawn flak but also derision from observers familiar with Afghan affairs. Every surge has invited stronger reaction. And the Taliban keep moving from one end to the other every time such an operation or application of force takes place.

Fifth, accompanying the advance of the coalition forces into Marjah is the unfolding crisis of the internally displaced people (IDPs). Several thousand people left their homes and took refuge with their families and relatives, or were put up in tents in the open outside Marjah to avoid crossfire. The numbers are not as big as was the case during the 1980s and 1990s, but regardless, there is much misery because of this issue. Further, the latest NATO strike in Uruzgan (on February 22) that killed between 21 and 30 people and also forced General McChrystal to appear on Afghan TV for an apology, was the third serious-most case of collateral damage over the last six months.

It should also be kept in mind the UN assessments that civilian casualties from NATO airstrikes went up 10 percent in 2009, and that President Karzai had to condemn these strikers in the opening session of parliament.

As a whole, one would tend to conclude that Operation Moshtarak for securing Marjah is yet another tactical manoeuvre that is being hyped for strategic and political gains, especially given the lack of importance of Marjah, with an underlying assumption that it will break the backs of the Taliban. One would, however, hope that the operation might at least undo the drug cartels and poppy dealers, who have thrived in Helmand despite the presence of several thousand British troops for so many years.

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