



Operation Omaid: Lessons Learned From Mushtarak

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As the security situation escalates in Afghanistan with the passage of each day, International forces in coordination with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are set to start a series of operations against the Taliban in southern provinces where the insurgency is most active. Thus, Kandahar province is going to be the next stage of a major operation against the insurgency in coming weeks and months. The recently dismissed, NATO-led forces commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, had stated that the “forces under his command had started the initial stage of a major operation which concentrated on securing major roads and district surrounding the Kandahar city.”² The operation codenamed, Omaid (‘Hope’) is aimed at pushing back the Taliban from major population centers and extending government authority to those areas that are cleared of insurgents. It is regarded as the second phase of operation Mushtarak (‘Together’) which was launched in mid-February and focused on clearing areas of Nad Ali and Lashkar Gah districts from Taliban domination. Although, it is not very clear how many forces would take part in this operation, a top U.S. administration official mentioned that this operation was going to be both complex and large scaled.

Kandahar city is the second largest city in Afghanistan and a dominant political and economic centre in the south.³ Historically, many Kings and Prime Ministers have come from Kandahar province. It was a power base for the spiritual leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, during his

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² “A Major Offensive in Kandahar Underway,” Quqnoos. 18 Mar. 2010.

http://quqnoos.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4109&Itemid=48. 3 Jun. 2010

³ Shah, Saeed. “Approaching fight for Kandahar may be crucial stage in Afghanistan war,” Guardian. 21 Feb. 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/feb/21/kandahar-arena-showdown-afghanistan-war>. 4 Jun. 2010



reign from 1994 – 2001. President Hamid Karzai too emanates from Kandahar and his younger brother Ahmad Wali Karzai heads the powerful Provincial Council in Kandahar. The Taliban have particular interests in Kandahar because of the location of the province and the ring road (connects western, southern and eastern parts of the country). It is also an important route that is used by international forces for their logistical supplies. If the Taliban regained control over Kandahar it would enable them to cut off road links between different provinces by obstructing the ring road which would disrupt supply routes and severely hamper the economy.

It is speculated that the Operation Omaid will be broadly similar to operation Mushtarak, launched in Helmand province. Omaid is expected to be a slow endured mission as coalition forces will try to avoid using heavy weapons to prevent civilian casualties. However, looking at the density of the population, geo-strategic location of Kandahar and the porous border it shares with neighboring Pakistan, such an operation will face impediments that will be very different from than the ones experienced in Helmand. Thus, the Afghan government should be fully prepared to deal with these new possible outcomes.

This article will contain two parts. The first part will attempt to compare the structure of operation Mushtarak with that of Operation Omaid, intended for Kandahar province in the summer of 2010 by evaluating the successes and failures of from the former. The second part of this analysis, in consideration of the lessons learned in Helmand, will highlight the process and impediments Operation Omaid could potentially face in Kandahar. In conclusion, this analysis will examine measures that could potentially facilitate a successful transition in Kandahar's Omaid operation.

Comparing Operation Mushtarak and Omaid

Even though US military generals in Afghanistan describe the Kandahar offensive as the second stage of operation Mushtarak, signaling that similar measures will be used in the Kandahar operation in reality the Operation Omaid will be more complex and diverse. The operation is described as the “biggest operation” in the history of Kandahar to date.⁴ The strategy designed for its implementation will have both military and civilian approaches, referred to as the “shape,

⁴ Fisher, Matthew. “Kandahar next in line for major offensive,” vancouversun. 17 Feb. 2010, <http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Kandahar+next+line+major+offensive/2574904/story.html>. 4 Apr. 2010

clear, hold and build”⁵ strategy. Unlike the operation in the Marja district of Helmand province, the Kandahar operation will have two major offensives instead of a single offensive. One offensive is going to cover Panjwayi and Zheray districts, located next to each other while another other offensive will be fought in Arghandab district located north of the provincial capital. Though, it is likely that both offensives may take place simultaneously.⁶ In Kandahar the Taliban are more amalgamated with the local community compared to Marja where the insurgency was more concentrated in one particular area. As a result, Operation Omaid will cover a larger area and the battle is likely to extend even to the hideouts of the insurgents in the neighboring province of Uruzgan.⁷ However, it is still unclear whether the “shape, clear, hold and build” strategy will be used in Ghorak and Mia Neshin districts, which are completely under the control of the Taliban.

The scale of troops participating in this operation will be very large and almost double the size of operation Mushtarak. According to one assessment 11,000 coalition troops including Canadians in addition to 8,000 Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are going to take part in the offensive set to begin in June.⁸ The main aim of launching the operation in June was to wait until additional troops arrived to the province to accelerate and clear targeted areas from militants before the coming of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. Some security analysts believe that the participation of such a large number of troops could result in many troop fatalities which they argue will stir public dismay in the in support of a speedy withdrawal and no room to extend the stay of foreign troops.

Announcing the intentions of an operation prior to the launching date is regarded by many security analysts as a big mistake as it provides militants an opportunity to flee the area. Nonetheless, in some instances this is done purposely to lure large numbers of militants in one given area as a means to encircle the militants. In many cases the Taliban have used this tactic whenever NATO has publicized its operations, however, in a recent article published in the Times Online, a senior Taliban commander, Mullah Abdul Rashid claimed that the insurgency

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Anne E. Kornblut and Greg Jaffe, “In Afghanistan, U.S. plans major push into Kandahar,” Washington Post. 27 Feb. 2010.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/26/AR2010022606008.html>. 8 Apr. 2010

⁸ O'Donnell, Lynne. “Mullen in Afghan war zone as U.S. gears up for Kandahar,” AFP. 30 Mar. 2010.

www.afpnet.org/article/ALeqM5hZQ6pivSenQ4tdc7WIS1DJJgwwuA. 12 Apr. 2010



learned many grave lessons from operation Mushtarak. He stated that “when NATO gave advance notice of the operation, the Taliban were lured into sending too many fighters to the area, some of whom died.”⁹ He further added that a plan has been prepared to counter NATO’s coming operation in Kandahar keeping in mind their downfalls during operation Mushtarak. Also, another reason for NATO to publically announce its operations could be to cause the Taliban to flee the area so “there are likely to be less casualties to civilians and coalition forces” making the “clear, hold and build” counter-insurgency strategy easier to achieve.

Possible Impediments Ahead Of the Operation

In contrast to Marja, Operation Omaid is going to be far more different and complicated. In terms of geography, Operation Omaid will cover an area ten times larger (54,022 sq. km) than operation Mushtarak (4,564 sq. km).¹⁰ The porous border (408 km) with Pakistan will make it easy for Taliban fighters to flee the area and enter Pakistan for protection. Also, the time-frame assigned for this operation is expected to be longer compared to Marja which only took two weeks to clear. Some other factors that might slow down the momentum of Operation Omaid are evaluated below:

- **Internally Displaced People (IDP)**

In the initial stages of Operation Omaid large numbers of the populace are going to be displaced. The province is one of the major population centers in Afghanistan and is home to around 990,100 inhabitants.¹¹ According to Kandahar governor, Tooryalai Wesa, they have stockpiled tents, medical supplies and food for 10,000 IDPs. However, many analysts believe that number may rise sharply and create problems for the provincial administration. Kandahar is already bearing the burden of IDPs who have migrated to the province from neighboring provinces and those IDPs who have migrated from districts to the provincial capital. “The figures include 1,500 families from Helmand, 1,250 from Kandahar, 570 from Zabul and 500 from Uruzgan.”¹² Adding more IDPs to the present scenario, in light of the summer season with temperatures

9 Grey, Stephen. “Taliban’s supreme leader signals willingness to talk peace,” timesonline. 18 Apr. 2010.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/afghanistan/article7100889.ece>. 22 Apr. 2010

10 [Anne E. Kornblut and Greg Jaffe](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/26/AR2010022606008.html), “In Afghanistan, U.S. plans major push into Kandahar,” Washington Post. 27 Feb. 2010.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/26/AR2010022606008.html>. 8 Apr. 2010

11 “Kandahar provincial profile,” Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. 15 Apr. 2007.

<http://www.mrrd.gov.af/nabdp/Provincial%20Profiles/Kandahar%20PDP%20Provincial%20profile.pdf>. 11 Apr. 2010

12 Rahman, Mujeeb. “UN agencies in Kandahar ready to help people during the winter,” Breaking the News Barrier. 20 Jan. 2010.

<http://breakingthenewsbarrier.com/breaknewblogs/?p=3529>. 2 Jun. 2010

soaring to 50 °C, will make health conditions in IDP camps a nightmare and might lead to an outbreak of epidemic diseases such as cholera or diarrhea causing high rates of mortalities. Displacement of people is also regarded by many security analysts a major factor behind the initial rejection of operation by tribal elders in a meeting with President Karzai. In that acrimonious meeting which took place on 4th April, locals had clearly expressed their opposition to conduct of any operation with large consensus. Whereas, in a recent meeting with President Karzai in the same hall, tribal elders agreed to cooperate with the government during the operation after they were assured by the previous commander of the international forces, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal and other Afghan officials that the scale of the operations would be minimized to reduce security concerns.¹³

- **Revenue Loss**

Kandahar is an important economic hub in the southern region of the country. Many neighboring provinces supply their primary goods from Kandahar city. The province also contributes a large amount of revenue to the national budget of Afghanistan. According to the director of Kandahar revenue department “only Kandahar customs generated 7 billion Afs (USD 148,936,170) in 2008 which makes up around 39% of the national income.”¹⁴ The main source of high custom revenue in the province is tolls and taxes that are collected from trucks traveling by Kandahar – Herat highway. This highway crosses the volatile districts of Zheray and Panjwayi which are located on both sides of highway. The aforementioned districts are expected to be the primary targets of Operation Omaid due to the active Taliban presence there. As a consequence, the number of trucks commuting between various southern and western provinces will decrease as a consequence causing the central government to incur huge losses in its national revenue.

- **Civilian Casualties**

In the last nine years, civilian casualties have remained to be one of the key points of tension between the Afghan government and international forces. On many occasions, uncoordinated bombardments by international forces during operations have resulted in high civilian casualties. However, for the first time in Marja, international forces abstained from using heavy handed

13 Recknagel, Charles. “McChrystal: Kandahar Operation Will Be 'Slow, Rising Tide' Of Security,” EurasiaNet. 14 May. 2010. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61071>. 24 Apr. 2010

14 “Kandahar Provincial Assessment,” Development Section. Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS). 2008. Page 109

bombardments in order to prevent civilian casualties. The outcome of this measure was very positive; during the entire operation only 28 civilians were killed.¹⁵ On the other hand, in Kandahar, the number of civilian casualties is estimated to be much higher as its population stands at 971,400, compared to 767,300, in Helmand. As a principal, international forces need to abandon or minimize their dependency on air support and must avoid targeting civilian areas. Moreover, the Taliban ought to impede from firing at international forces from populace areas or positions close to it so to not injure or kill civilians.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be said that the core aim of Operation Omaid should be to win the hearts and minds of local Afghans and restore the authority of the government in areas previously influenced by the Taliban. It is an accepted fact that in any counterinsurgency campaign the support of the local population plays a decisive role in winning the battle. Clearing any given area from militants should be accompanied with development and reconstruction projects to create employment opportunities to those youth who are more prone to join the Taliban because of financial motivations. At the same time, the government must ensure that it provides basic services to locals to further alienate them from the militants. Reopening official departments, particularly formal courts in the remote districts and villages will greatly contribute to the hearts and minds strategy. Currently, there are many districts in Kandahar province that lack local official departments, forcing locals to travel to Kandahar city in order to solve minor concerns such as the acquisition of a national identity card.

On the other hand, taking some cautious measures during the operation will help make the operation more focused. For instance, both Afghan and international forces should be coordinated in their efforts during the operation to avoid independent actions. All intelligence information collected from local informants on the ground should be verified prior to taking action, since in some instances that information could be based on personal and tribal animosities. Another important measure is abstaining from usage of heavy weapons and airpower. As a lesson learned from Marja, it would be helpful for the coalition forces to use light weapons in the residential areas in order to minimize civilian casualties and prevent potential

¹⁵ Vogt, Heidi. "Civilian toll rises in NATO's Marja offensive," The Star. 25 Feb. 2010.
<http://www.thestar.com/news/world/afghanistan/article/771200--civilian-toll-rises-in-nato-s-marja-offensive>. 1 Jun. 2010

public anger triggered by it. Meanwhile, the operation should be used to send a strong political message to the Taliban and other anti-government elements that exclaims that if they do not lay down their weapons and respond positively to the decisions made by tribal elders in the National Consultative Peace Jirga, the government will have no choice but to resort to military means to resolve the ongoing conflict.



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