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Mullah Engagement Program: Helmand and Farah Provinces, Afghanistan 15 February – 15 March 2010

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“By order of the Commanding General, 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), Afghanistan, the Command Chaplain and a Muslim Chaplain (if obtainable), along with appropriate political specialists, governance advisors, and necessary security, were to engage with Islamic leadership in Helmand and Farah Provinces in discussions to enhance the relationship with key religious leaders and the communities in which they serve in order to convey the good will and otherwise positive intentions of U.S. Government and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force)/NATO forces operating in the region in conjunction with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and its military and police forces.”

This was the basic premise for the operation which subsequently took place between February and March 2010, and for which I was responsible to organize and carry out. Additionally, my responsibilities as the MEB Command Chaplain were to provide religious coverage, general pastoral care for the Marines and Sailors of 2nd MEB, and supervision of 15 chaplains.

After this order was given, I contacted my Muslim Chaplain friend of nine years, whose name will not be used for security reasons, and so for the purposes of this article will be referred to as Chaplain “Salam,” which in Arabic means “peace.” He was serving in the Washington D.C. area and I asked him if he would carry out this mission with me. He is a naturalized U.S. citizen and a Naval Chaplain Corps Officer who has done great work for the Navy and the Department of Defense. His exemplary record extends beyond his service as an Imam in the Navy serving the religious needs of Sailors and Marines and includes his contributions as a key religious liaison between our Government and the American Islamic Community and his relationship with foreign government officials in the D.C. area from a number of Islamic states.

Negotiations for his trip to Afghanistan began in September of 2009 and his arrival finally occurred a full six months later in February 2010. While awaiting his arrival I had been working on plans with the MEB Operations department and with other key individuals who were part of our “governance advisory” team to lay out the strategy to meet with the senior religious leaders in Helmand and Farah provinces of Southern Afghanistan where we were conducting operations. The plan would then go to the next phase. Once we had established a relationship with these

leaders we would move out into the local areas where MEB combat forces were actively involved in clearing and security operations in order to engage in peaceful dialogue with the local religious leaders (mullahs) to convey our message. The title “mullah” comes from a Judeo-Persian word which is the title for a Muslim man who leads a mosque, and is roughly the equivalent of a local “pastor” in America. The Arabic word for mullah is “Imam.”

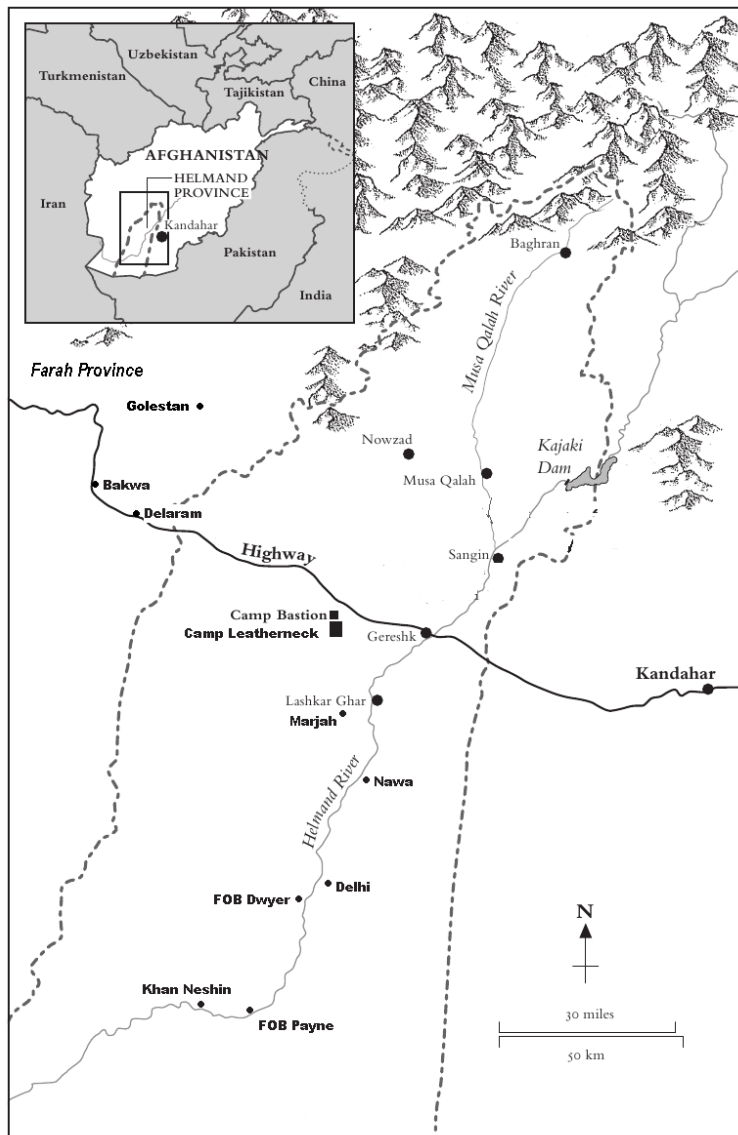
The first leader with whom we met was the ***Director of Hajj for Helmand Province***. He was also the mullah for the Grand Mosque in Lashkar Ghar. His name was Sayed “Mullah” Mukhtar Ahmad Haqqani, who also bore the title of “Hajji,” which means that he had made a spiritual pilgrimage to Mecca. This journey is called “the Hajj.” As one of the Five Pillars of Islam, making a pilgrimage to Mecca is the goal of every Muslim and should be accomplished at least once in his lifetime. As the Director of Hajj for Helmand Province he is the government religious official responsible for determining who from Helmand Province will make the trip to Mecca each year. This made Mullah Mukhtar a very influential individual in the community. He was a dynamic and engaging man who immediately grasped our plan and intentions and took both of us “under his wing” as we circulated throughout the province together.



We traveled throughout Helmand and Farah provinces sharing our message of peace and religious cooperation, but we also wanted to show the Afghan mullahs the religious dimension of the U.S. Military and especially that of the Marines operating in their area. Most of the mullahs with whom we met did not understand what the function of a military chaplain was and were especially surprised to learn that the U.S. Marines had a “Muslim” chaplain. Mullah Mukhtar would start off our meetings with the requisite prayers and then preach to the mullahs gathered with us about the cooperative efforts of the Afghan government and the U.S. Marines, as well as the futility of continuing to support the Taliban. This was followed by a plea for those who actually were Taliban to reconcile with the Government of Afghanistan. This reconciliation campaign was directed by President Karzai and is integral to all counterinsurgency operations conducted by U.S. Marines and the rest of the NATO forces in Afghanistan due to the desire to minimize the kinetic aspect of the military involvement there. Mullah Mukhtar introduced me and Chaplain “Salam” as a Christian Mullah and a Muslim Imam who work together, demonstrating how American freedom of religion is expressed. He would tell the mullahs that we were leaders who show how a Christian/Islamic partnership can work toward achieving the common goals of peace and religious freedom. The mullahs were also somewhat surprised and some were even shocked to hear that there are six to eight million Muslims in America who are free to pursue the practice of their faith in over 1500 mosques throughout the United States.



Chaplain “Salam,” Chaplain Pelikan and Director Mullah Mukhtar Haqqani in a Mosque with the mullahs of the town of Nowzad, Northern Helmand Province.



From our home base at Camp Leatherneck our travels together with Mullah Mukhtar, whom we would pick-up via helicopter in Lashkar Ghar, took us to Nowzad, Khan Neshin in Southern Helmand, Delhi, Nawa, and the Marjah district. Marjah, in early March when we visited there, was still quite violent and unstable.



Meeting with the mullahs in the Taliban stronghold of Marjah



One of the Marjah mullahs making me an honorary mullah.



Me, Mullah Mukhtar, the Marjah District Governor Hajji Zahir, and Chaplain "Salam"



Our Primary means of travel was by helicopter, much of the time over areas where we were subject to possible hostile fire



Meeting with the mullahs of Khan Neshin in Southern Helmand Province. The mullah in the center facing the camera was a Taliban mullah. We discussed the reconciliation program with him.

The second key leader with whom we engaged in the operation was the **Director of Hajj for Farah Province**: “Hajji” Maulawi Ghulam Mohammad Rohanni.

An intellectual leader, Ghulam Rohanni was an Islamic scholar, which is called a “Malawi.” He is a very dynamic and charismatic individual, who commanded much respect from the mullahs with whom we met in the towns of Bakwa and Golestan, which happened also to



have been Mawlawi Rohanni's hometown. These towns had seen a lot of Taliban activity, and our Marines had taken a number of losses in the regions around them as well.



At our first meeting, which took place in Golestan, we met with a large number of mullahs. Mawlawi Ghulam Rohanni started things off with exhortations to engender cooperation with GIROA and the Marines, and with introductions all around as in previous engagements. As we had done at our other meetings, we each gave a short presentation following Mawlawi Ghulam Rohanni's initial

introduction. Once again, after reciting some passages from the Holy Koran, Chaplain "Salam" would then lead everyone in the prayers. We would always try to schedule our meetings so that after an initial lecture and discussion, Chaplain "Salam" would lead the gathered mullahs in the noon prayers. This session turned out to be extremely productive in terms of opening up new avenues of trust and cooperation with the local Afghans. It enhanced the ability of the Marine Company Commander at the Golestan Forward Operating Base (FOB) to communicate with the locals, determine better ways to assist the community with their many "quality of life" issues, and helped empower the local mullahs by connecting them with GIROA through the Farah Provincial Director of Hajj. This was the Director's first visit to his hometown in a long time because prior to the Marines arrival the security situation in the region had been just too unstable for him to make regular visits.

The next visit in the Farah Province was with a group of mullahs and the District Governor in the town of Bakwa. We again experienced a very positive response from these local mullahs and Mawlawis (scholars/teachers). As I previously mentioned, many of the mullahs with whom we met in all of the towns and villages we visited were either affiliated with or at least supported the Taliban, and some actually wore the "mark" of a Taliban. The mark is an Islamic crescent and star,



tattooed onto the right hand. One of the mullahs who wore the mark, approached us after our meeting in Bakwa while we were having lunch together. He said something that really caught our ear. He told us that he was a Taliban Mawlawi who taught in a Madrasa (an Islamic school for boys), just outside of Bakwa. So tremendously impressed by our message, he stated, “before today I just thought that all Westerners were infidels and I was against you. But today I saw something that I’d never seen before. And I have changed my mind about Americans. I will work with you from now on.”



In the Mosque in Bakwa with the mullahs and Mawlawis of the area.



The Taliban Mawlawi who expressed these sentiments is in the center of the picture above, standing next to Chaplain “Salam.” This operation opened doors that were previously closed to ISAF forces operating in Helmand. In the general conduct of counterinsurgency operations the religious aspect is often either overlooked or is simply thought of as something to shy away from because many people feel unqualified to discuss religion. We chaplains, however, are never

ashamed to talk about religion. And our experience in this operation proved that the direct approach with the Afghan religious leaders was the right one. For the most part, they are intelligent despite lacking formal education, particularly pragmatic, and deeply spiritual. They appreciated both Chaplain “Salam’s” perspective as a U.S. educated Imam, and mine as an Orthodox Christian. They were fascinated to know some of the customs and practices of Orthodoxy such as the prescribed prayer times for Orthodox Christians, occurring seven times a day, and that we followed Abraham’s example of paying a tenth (tithes) of our income to the church. I told them that not everyone, of course, follows these disciplines to the letter, but that all of us, like them, were engaged in the “Jihad” against the evil in our lives and that “God willing,” (en shah Allah), we would succeed and fulfill His will for our lives. They all seemed pleased by this. Then, sparked by a question from one of the mullahs immediately following my comments on “fulfilling God’s will,” regarding “what Christians do to enforce the law in America,” I seized the opportunity to discuss how the role of religious leaders in America differed from that of the mullahs in Afghanistan with regard to how government laws are enforced. I told them that in the 1st amendment to our Constitution, our government is set-up in a way that “separates” the State from religion. This structure “protects” the Church and any religion from government intervention in religious affairs. It also, however, precludes religious leaders of any faith from performing any kind of direct enforcement of those laws. Where they said they would be able to “cut off a man’s hand if he were caught stealing,” I responded with how we would instead engage local law enforcement officials to bring like offenders to justice by arresting, detaining, and trying them in our court and justice system. I explained how even though in America the government was separate from the Church or any particular religious view point; most of our laws, however, had been inspired by God’s laws as understood in the Ten Commandments. Since Christians, Jews, and Muslims share a common understanding of how those laws came into being, and that we all believe they should be applied universally; this seemed to satisfy their curiosity on the subject.

In conclusion, it was an incredible privilege to meet and work with these devout Muslim leaders, and to carry out this mission in fulfillment of the visionary leadership of the 2nd MEB Commanding General, BGen Larry Nicholson, USMC, who really conceived of the entire operation. His experience and knowledge of counterinsurgency operations inspired the plan to engage these religious leaders because he knew that their support was critical to the success of the NATO/ISAF forces mission to assist the establishment of legitimate Afghan governance. I was also privileged to explain some of the tenets of Orthodox Christianity to these leaders of the Afghan people in a way that I never thought I would be able to. Since I am personally not offended or intimidated by other religious view points, and since I had studied Islam for many years both in seminary and privately, I believe I was uniquely equipped to meet and dialogue with these Muslim leaders during my tour there. My goal was to seek out the commonalities between our belief systems rather than to simply exclude or disparage people of another faith simply because of their differing religious views. As an Orthodox Christian, reaching out in confidence, openness, love, and understanding like I had the opportunity to do here, is one of the hallmarks of true freedom of religion. I also believe that as a result of this operation, and especially by working with the two Directors of Hajj, Chaplain “Salam” and I were able to make significant headway toward forging positive relationships between Christian and U.S. Muslim clergy, GIRA Muslim leaders, and especially with the local religious leaders throughout Helmand and Farah Provinces.

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