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Interview with Jeffrey Dressler

An Interim Assessment on the Campaign for Regaining the Momentum in Helmand Province

By Octavian Manea

Jeffrey Dressler is a Research Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) where he studies security dynamics in southeastern and southern Afghanistan. He has previously published the ISW report, Counterinsurgency in Helmand: Progress and Remaining Challenges (January 2011). Dressler was invited to Afghanistan in July 2010 to join a team conducting research for General David Petraeus following his assumption of command.

How would you diagnose the COIN efforts and the on the ground developments before summer 2009?

Primarily, I would say that the effort was under-resourced from the beginning of 2006 up until 2009. I would also point to a lack of strategic clarity in terms of the objectives that were being pursued. The forces, lacking the resources and the mandate to really operate in an aggressive manner, were unable to address the enemy situation and instead were focusing on reconstruction and development as the means to win over the population.

What is today the record of the 2009 “Operation Strike of the Sword”? At the time, the targeted centers of gravity were Nawa, Garmser and Nad Ali districts. Using the classical terminology of a comprehensive COIN operation (clear-hold-build) in what specific sequence are we today in these districts?

Since the summer of 2009 when the operation started, it’s been almost 20 months and what we are actually seeing in these specific districts is the transition from the clear to the hold and now they are in the phase of transitioning from the hold to the build stage. In between those stages, you focus on increasing the capacity of district governance, and of the Afghan leadership while you begin to transfer more responsibilities to the Afghan National Security Forces. We see this increasingly in Nawa and increasingly we will see it in Nad-e-Ali and Garmser. I would say that things are actually progressing quite well.

Is the Nawa success the operational archetype/template to have in mind as the desirable end state in the Helmand campaign? Why is Nawa a COIN success story? What has worked in Nawa?

When you look to Nawa, in a sense it is like a “Petri dish” for COIN in Afghanistan. There are certain things that are unique to Nawa which helped it become a successful example of counterinsurgency. The first is that it is largely homogenous in terms of the tribes that were there in the area. The tribal leaders seemed to have pretty good relations with each other and that helps when you are trying to work with them in order to establish security and build district

governance. The other thing that you have in Nawa from a military perspective was sufficient force that was able to operate aggressively and this in connection with the ability to work with the Afghans at the district level really helped to stabilize the situation. You had the delivery of district governance that had been established from the beginning and was pretty effectual but at the same time you had to do effect some changes: when the Marines first came in one of the first things they had to do was to fire basically half of the preexisting police force and to work to rehire and retrain the current police force. One of the other things that led to success in Nawa was that you didn't see the gains in Nawa really taking up until the Marines went in Marjah in February 2010 when we were able to take away the enemy sanctuaries there, because Marjah was really affecting the progress in places like Garmser, Nad-e-Ali, but particularly in Nawa because of its proximity. So after you were able to take away the Taliban sanctuaries there, they weren't able to resource the insurgency in places like Nawa as effectively as they had done throughout the course of the fall 2009.

Starting from February 2010, Marjah is the subject of an intensive comprehensive COIN campaign. How would you assess the progress in Marjah after almost 12 months?

One of the things, I would say about progress in Marjah is that it looks slower but in fact it hasn't been so. The expectations for how quickly the things would progress in Marjah were set a bit too high. Knowing that it would take between 6 to 12 months to successfully execute the shape and clear phases of counterinsurgency, things have actually progressed reasonably well. The other challenge in Marjah which was different than in places like Garmser and Nawa, is that it was really an insurgency stronghold, a center for their narcotics production, refining and smuggling operations. It was tremendously important for the insurgency and they were willing to fight a little bit harder for it. The other thing is that population has been dominated by the insurgents for years so the ability to work with them and begin to earn their trust took a little bit longer than it did in other areas that didn't have a quite of strong history with the insurgency as Marjah did. For all these reasons it was more challenging, but what I would say is that coming in this February it has been a year since operations started and things are actually progressing quite well on all fronts: district governance, security situation, independent local police and the enemy resistance there has fallen off to insignificant levels. They are no longer able to challenge progress to Marjah to the extent they had throughout the spring of 2010.

Which is today the attitude of the local population in all these districts (Marjah, Nawa, Nad-e-Ali, Garmser) because it seems to me that, before the summer 2009, the reach of the coalition and of the Afghan governmental forces was almost zero? Is it significantly changed? After all in COIN the support of the local population is the heart of the entire effort.

The extension of the ISAF and Afghan government was quite limited prior to 2009. The best way to allow the Afghan people to come forward if they choose to support the Afghan government and the Afghan security forces is to provide the security to create the time and space that is necessary to allow them to come out - free from Taliban intimidation, free from oppression, and the fear that they will lose their life if they cooperate. What we are starting to see now, is the benefits of what the coalition and Afghan governance efforts have provided for them. The population willingness to come forward and support these efforts is probably the best indicator whether or not your COIN campaign is going to be successful. We see this increasingly in places like Garmser, Nawa, Nad-e-Ali, to a lesser degree in Marjah, and in some of the other

areas where we had a heavy footprint for a while. Of course there are still challenges, the north is currently the focus of the military efforts now, but certainly where we are today (the Afghan population in Helmand) versus where we were two years ago is vastly different.

General Nick Carter has defined the metric to judge success in Helmand province as “*the extent to which you can connect district governance to the population*”. Having this metric in mind, where were we in the fall of 2009 and where are we today?

I would choose a different phrasing of the metric. I would say that you can judge success in Helmand province based on the extent to which the population wants to be connected to the district and provincial governance and their willingness to repudiate the Taliban. I think that this is much more important to focus on rather than forcing district governance down on them. It is not something that gets you where you want to be. Ultimately I think that this is something that is being done right now: creating the security bubbles that will allow the population to become involved with district governance should they choose to be involved. And in fact we are seeing the choosing to be involved whether through economic assistance, agricultural assistance, participation in district shuras and community councils and really taking ownership for their district. First you must provide the security space to allow this natural process to happen but in the same time ISAF forces are spending a tremendous amount of effort assisting district governance, and their capabilities (staffing, resources) and making sure that they actually have the capacity to provide services that they are supposed to. It is really an entire different scenario now than it was 2 years ago. I can't say that these gains will be lasting and irreversible until perhaps the end of the next summer's fighting season. I think at that point we can comfortably say whether or not these COIN efforts in Helmand have been successful. But the signs we are seeing now are definitely encouraging.

Can we point out after a year to a bubble of security in central Helmand?

The goal, obviously is to create bubbles of security in southern and central Helmand and then to expand and connect them. And part of that, very important is the freedom of movement for the local population. Can a farmer from southern Garmser district safely travel to Lashkar Gah to sell his crops and further more, can that farmer travel East to Kandahar to sell his crops on that larger market? The purpose is that of connecting communities with the markets, allowing the population to move freely to do whatever they need to do. We are not there yet, but the things are progressing quite well. Connecting Kandahar and Helmand together to have a contiguous belt of security is the next step. That is going to be really the main focus of ISAF and Afghan efforts throughout the course of the next fighting season.

Did the coalition regain the strategic initiative after President Obama announced his surge?

In order to really regain the initiative, or the momentum, you needed the additional forces. The forces that President Obama provided were desperately needed and what ISAF had to do with those forces was essentially prioritize and come up with a phased campaign to prioritize some areas over the others. And the South (particularly Helmand and Kandahar) were prioritized over East. In places like Helmand we have seized back the initiative from the insurgency. And in Kandahar the forces that are working there now, that are engaged in clearing operations in the districts around Kandahar city are working to seize the initiative back from the insurgency there. If you could successfully do that in the Taliban heartland in Southern Afghanistan, then I think,

you have gone a really long way. In the same time we also must remember that the East is also critical because it is the location of the Haqqani Network who works very closely with Al-Qaeda. We can't just say that we have succeeded in the South and we've done. The East is critical and should be the next focus.

When could we judge if the current effort is on the right path? In a year from now?

I think that we are seeing that the things are on the right path. Unfortunately it has taken 10 years to get to the point where, you can confidently say that the things are moving in the right direction. In the same time, we have to distinguish between the security effort and the governance effort. The security effort particularly in the Southern Afghanistan is progressing quite well. The challenges addressing poor governance or predatory governance continues to persist and remains one of the key issues that need to be dealt with. You can have all the success you want, on the security line of effort, but in terms of enduring lasting success you have to have governance progress and success also. I would highlight that as a critical challenge moving forward in 2011.

To what extent were the local community initiatives used in this effort of regaining the momentum in those specific areas where the reach of the government was limited?

I think it was a tremendous force multiplier. One of the key things here is that you can't force a community to stand up and police its villages against the Taliban. They have to want to do it. To the extent that this is happening in Helmand and increasingly so in Kandahar, it signals a sort of checking off the boxes of one of the key elements of this strategy which is – the population willingness to repudiate the Taliban. When we talk about the population and the Taliban as being the same, and that we are fighting the same people we are trying to protect, clearly the establishment of these groups shows that that's not correct, that there is a difference, that the population has identified that there is a difference, and that they are willing to stand up and drive out those unsavory elements. In the same time, eventually, those groups must fit in some sort of state structures in order not to become a rogue militia. Currently the Afghan government recognizes this and it is willing to expand these programs not just in the south, but in the east, north and west as well.

Where are the Afghans (ANA, ANP, ALP units, but also Afghan administration) in the battle of regaining the initiative?

The situation in Helmand with respect to the Afghan Army is interesting: it is a new army corp that has been stood up in Helmand. And that corp was made from elements of other units so it takes some time to gain cohesion and work on training together to operate as an effective force. We are starting to see that now, and the Marines and UK forces have an indigenous effort which respect to Helmand training local police and local army that compliments the national level effort. I think that works well and what we are seeing is a progression in both the professionalization and the capabilities of the Afghan security forces in Helmand. At the same time we are also seeing an effective governor working with his district leaders to extend the writ of governance to the periphery within Helmand.

Octavian Manea is the Editor of FP Romania, the Romanian edition of Foreign Policy.

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