

Musa Qala: Adapting to the Realities of Modern Counterinsurgency

Thomas Donnelly and Gary J. Schmitt

This SWJ article is an excerpt from a forthcoming American Enterprise Institute study on the war in Afghanistan and NATO's future.

The town of Musa Qala is, in many ways, a typical Afghan market town. "I saw no obvious concessions to modern living," reported James Holland of his spring 2008 visit to Musa Qala.

In fact, I was reminded of a picture book of ancient Persia I had as a boy. I suspect the scene would not have appeared unfamiliar to Alexander the Great, who passed through here in 329 B.C. My first sight of Musa Qala was of a gray, sprawling mass that far side of a 200-year wadi [or river bed]. It was raining, the skies were leaden and the concrete and mud-built building appeared monochrome and somber.¹

The town sits on the Musa Qala River, an often-dry tributary of the Helmand River, the geographic feature – along with the Highway 1 ring road that ties Afghanistan together and connects the capital, Kabul, to the rest of the country – which defines Helmand province. It also links the ring road and lowland Helmand to the mountains of central Afghanistan. It is the last stop before the town of Baghran, in the northernmost tip of Helmand and near the border with the rugged Oruzgan and Daikundi provinces, which has been a Taliban redoubt since the initial U.S. invasion.

The town also gives its name to Musa Qala District, but two other factors contribute to its real importance: it is the hometown of the Alizai tribe, Helmand's largest Pashtun group – though the tribal politics are devilishly complex: the Alizai are comprised of six major clans, but are a sub-tribe of the Noorzai, which is one of the five major tribes that make up the Durrani Pashtuns, one of the two main Pashtun groupings in the Afghan-Pakistan border regions; altogether there may be as many as 400 clans among the Pashtun peoples.² Musa Qala is also a crossroads in the opium trade. And these two factors – tribal politics and the drug trade – are linked.

¹ James Holland, "Dispatches: Musa Qala, Afghanistan," *Granta*, April 18, 2008, at <http://www.granta.com/Online-OnlyLetter-From-Musa-Qala-Afghanistan>

² See David Isby, "The High Stakes Battle for the Future of Musa Qala," *CTC Sentinel*, Comating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2008, pp. 10-12.

*The Alizai are known to be Taliban sympathizers, arms smugglers, and heavily involved in the illicit drug trade. The former governor of Helmand province, an unsavory Alizai tribesman named Sher Muhammad Akhundzada, was found with over nine tons of opium at his provincial headquarters by U.S. officials. [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai subsequently fired Sher Muhammad upon the insistence of [British] forces who were preparing to deploy throughout Helmand province in 2006.*³

But it was for the British that Musa Qala was to become not only important but “iconic,” in the words of British Defense Secretary Des Brown.⁴ Since that initial deployment in 2006, Musa Qala became an icon of Britain’s initial failures in Afghanistan. Indeed, “Musa Qala was iconic for all the wrong reasons,” observed Brigadier Andrew Mackay, until this summer the senior British officer in Afghansitan, “because the Taliban were in control.” But perhaps now, Musa Qala is in the process of being transformed into an icon of how the British army adapted to the realities of modern counterinsurgency operations, how the rest of the British government was moved to begin developing an ability to conduct strategic reconstruction programs, how a tottering British government found enough resolve to remain committed to Afghanistan and, not least, how the traditional toughness of the British people endures. Continued Mackay: “We’re now trying to make it iconic for the right reasons – reconstruction and development.”⁵ Put it this way: if Great Britain succeeds in its Afghanistan mission, Musa Qala may well be seen as the turning point; if Great Britain fails, Musa Qala will be seen as the point where Britain chose to accept defeat. Through painful experience, the British have learned what to do; the question remains whether they have the will to do it.

When the British army arrived in Musa Qala in 2006, it regarded itself as the western world’s premier counterinsurgent force, with a long tradition of success as in Malaya and most recently with a wealth of experience in Northern Ireland. Yet when the deployment of 3300 British soldiers began in April, the situation in Helmand Province was murky; only a small number of U.S. units had been in Helmand since the fall of the Taliban four years previously. One month prior, the British Parliament’s Select Committee on Defence had simply noted that Helmand, “situated in the south of Afghanistan, is a province where security is described by [the Ministry of Defense] as ‘less benign’ than in the north.”⁶

Musa Qala had been marked by the Afghan government as a critical battleground from the start, although such far-flung towns paled in importance to Lashkar Gah, the

³ Matt Dupee, see Afgha.com link through http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/12/a_chronology_of_the_1.php

⁴ David Loyn, “Why the battle for Musa Qala matters,” BBC News, at http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7137041.stm

⁵ Katrine Bussey “Nato ‘making progress’ in Afghanistan,” The Guardian,” April 13, 2008 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/13/afghanistan.nato>

⁶ Quoted in *Helmand: The Soldiers’ Story*, National Army Museum, London, at <http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/exhibitions/helmand>

provincial capital and home to almost two-thirds of the Helmand population. The British established Camp Bastion near the provincial capital as their headquarters; it became the largest British military base built since World War II. From there, the British units that made up the 16 Air Assault Brigade began long-range patrols and, as encounters with the Taliban increased, more heavily armored “maneuver outreach groups” to try to interdict Taliban movements. Over time, British forces were dispersed throughout the countryside, with several mid-size forward operating bases and an increasing number of smaller “platoon houses.” These fortified, mud-walled outposts were a British version of a classic counterinsurgency tactic, one that had proved successful in Northern Ireland. But dispersing such small forces in the far reaches of Helmand would tax the British Army to the limits of its resources.

The outpost in Musa Qala, with a 24-man platoon of the fabled British Parachute Regiment, quickly earned the nickname of “The Alamo,” as it came under 52 days of sustained Taliban mortar and ground assaults. “We were attacked daily with everything in the Taliban arsenal,” recalled one soldier.

When the attacks came, it was always a shock. You would sometimes hear the rocket a split second before the impact. We had people on guard at all times; they sat in protected bunkers scanning the town with binoculars. On many occasions the initial blast would be followed by an attack, sometimes mounted by up to 10 Taliban, who fired what seemed at the time like thousands of rounds at us.⁷

After a month, the British mounted a relief column with help from Danish troops on July 21, but, after moving exceedingly deliberately the 60 miles from Camp Bastion over several days, as the column reached the outskirts of Musa Qala, it was ambushed from three sides by Taliban forces. An air strike from a U.S. B-1 bomber allowed the relief column to break off the engagement and regroup. Five days after leaving Camp Bastion, the relief column finally broke through to Musa Qala and delivered much-needed ammunition and other supplies. Still, the Taliban surrounded the Musa Qala garrison.

On August 1, the paratroopers attempted their own breakout, hoping to rendezvous with a small column of British armored infantry. The relief column with which they planned to link up was again ambushed and a number of British Scimitar vehicles – roughly similar to the U.S. Bradley fighting vehicles – were destroyed and several British soldiers killed. It was clear that only a large-scale operation would be sure of extracting the beleaguered garrison. More B-1 strikes suppressed known Taliban positions and a relief force of two platoons from the Royal Irish Regiment and a 140-man Danish cavalry squadron replaced the paratroopers.

⁷ The account of the initial fighting around Musa Qala is derived from Lieutenant Colonel D.J. Reynold, “Pure hell of the siege of Musa Qala,” *The Times of London*, August 12, 2007, at <http://timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article2240429.ece>.

Fighting in Musa Qala continued without pause, and when the Danes pulled out and were replaced by only two under-strength Irish platoons, the Taliban began massed infantry attacks intended to force the issue. In four weeks of fighting, and suffering several casualties, the Royal Irish expended a quarter of the machine-gun rounds used by British forces in Afghanistan in the course of the year. The Alamo held, but in early October, local residents approached the compound with an offer: if the British would withdraw, the locals would likewise force the Taliban to leave.

It was an offer the British could not or would not refuse. Without consulting NATO commanders or Afghan President Hamid Karzai, on October 17, 2006, the Royal Irish withdrew from Musa Qala after signing a peace agreement with local tribal elders, who assumed responsibility for local security. The Taliban immediately claimed they had forced the British to retreat.

In truth, the British did not retreat very far. Though the tribal elders were supposedly in control of Musa Qala, British and Danish units patrolled the surrounding country. In December 2006 and January 2007, these patrols began to bump into an increasing Taliban presence and employ NATO airpower to strike at these formations; on January 26, 2007, one strike killed the Taliban's "regional commander," Mullah Ibrahim.

But these patrol-and-strike tactics reflected an essential weakness. A week later, hundreds of Taliban under Mullah Ibrahim's brother, Mullah Gafoor, attacked and seized the town of Musa Qala, disarming the Afghan police and raising the Taliban flag over the Afghan district headquarters. A February 4 NATO air strike targeted Mullah Gafoor and his personal security detail and 10 days later yet another air strike killed a third Taliban commander, Mullah Manan. But the Taliban remained in the city, fortifying it with defensive positions and booby-trapping buildings; many Musa Qala residents fled the town. The town tribal leaders were placed under house arrest and the Taliban began to impose restrictions on the populace. The air strikes were occasionally effective in targeting Taliban leaders, but the situation on the ground throughout Helmand province worsened as overstretched British forces lacked the strength to control not only Musa Qala but other important towns.

The strength of Taliban forces in and around Musa Qala grew, possibly, according to Taliban claims, to as many as 2,000 fighters; Taliban propaganda promised that they would subjugate all of Helmand. In March, significant numbers of ISAF forces were diverted farther north in Helmand in Operation Achilles, an effort to secure the area around the Kajaki Dam. This effort demanded not only site security around the major USAID reconstruction project, but of the roads leading to Kajaki: the major work was to install a massive new turbine that would improve power supplies in Helmand and Kandahar, but the poor Afghan roads needed to be improved to enable the project to proceed.

As the spring 2007 fighting season arrived, Afghan President Karzai, Defense Minister Rahim Wardak and Helmand Governor Asadullah Wafa attempted to talk the Taliban out of Musa Qala; the Taliban respond by hanging three men charged with cooperating with

ISAF in the strike on Mullah Manan. In mid-April, Defense Minister Wardak declared the government would retake Musa Qala, but no action was immediately forthcoming. Indeed, the Taliban tightened their grip on Musa Qala, hanging four more men and imposing controls on all aspects to life: women were forced wear the full-veil *burqa* and could not travel unless accompanied by a male relative; the Taliban imposed taxes and military conscription and began local FM radio broadcasts. Musa Qala was essentially under Taliban governance.

Musa Qala had also become a base for operations aimed at neighboring districts. In July, Taliban forces from Musa Qala struck southward into the area around the town of Sangin, where the Musa Qala River joins the Helmand River, and coordinated a sophisticated and well-prepared ambush of a joint Afghan-ISAF patrol near Shaban village. The initial engagement ended when ISAF air strikes destroyed two Taliban compounds, but rather than breaking contact, the Taliban sent in reinforcements and set a second ambush the next day. And on July 26, three days later, the Taliban mounted a third major ambush at a separate village in southern Musa Qala province. To be sure, these ambushes were defensive actions in response to probes from the Afghan army and ISAF. Coalition airpower provided a decisive tactical advantage, but the campaign also revealed how strong and pervasive the Taliban presence had become. The town had achieved its iconic status.

The Afghan-ISAF patrols also discovered how deeply linked the Taliban is to the local heroin trade. Several days of fighting around the village of Regay, situated along the Musa Qala riverbed or *wadi*, an area that quickly becomes the focus of operations throughout the fall, resulted in the destruction of a large heroin lab and the Taliban force meant to defend it. In addition to Afghan and British forces, significant elements of the U.S. 82nd Airborne division were committed to the effort to begin to clear Musa Qala province. Through September and October, there were large-scale ambushes and encounters on a weekly basis; the Taliban had prepared innumerable defensive positions. The fighting was fierce but one-sided – hundreds of Taliban were killed – and progress toward the district capital was slow but steady.

The shifting tide was apparent to some local leaders. Sher Mohammad Akhunzada reemerged to express his desire to resume his governorship. More importantly, Mullah Abdul Salaam, a Musa Qala Taliban commander and leading figure among the Alizai tribe, negotiated terms of defection with the Karzai government. To British officials and ISAF commanders, Mullah Salaam's defection was seen as a major coup. He led a fighting force of about 200 and had once been an intimate of Taliban figurehead Mullah Mohammad Omar. Yet Mullah Salaam had a reputation as a mercurial personality who had manipulated factional and family differences among the Alizai to achieve his position. He had served as the Taliban governor of Oruzgan and district governor of Kajaki. In that post he earned a reputation for favoring his own Pirzai subtribe at the particular expense of the Hassanzai (of which Sher Mohamad Akhunzada was a leader).⁸ In sum, by making common cause with Mullah Salaam, the British had turned a major

⁸ Making Musa Qala Work," *Afghan Recovery Report*, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 17, 2008, at http://www.iwpr.net/index.php?apc_state=hen&s=o&o=l=EN&p=arr&s=f&o=342021.

Taliban leader, but could not be certain of his lasting loyalty or of the long-term cost of his services.

The outreach also reflected a shift in British policy occasioned by Gordon Brown's replacement of Tony Blair as prime minister. A review of Afghanistan strategy had concluded that it made sense to support Karzai's effort to court "moderate" Taliban leaders and so-called "tier-two" commanders, who, it was believed, fought more for money and from a sense of tribal obligation than from radical Islamic ideology.⁹ And the situation in Musa Qala made the immediate rewards seem greater than the long-term risks. Despite the onset of winter, ISAF commanders were insistent that the campaign continue.

In mid-October, a new British unit, 52 Infantry Brigade, under Brigadier Mackay, rotated into Afghanistan with the mission, among others, of reclaiming Musa Qala. Because of the previous setbacks, Mackay's brigade had undergone a revamped training regimen and a new British appreciation of Afghan-relevant counterinsurgency tactics. "Counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan are complex, demanding and conducted at a high tempo," declared Mackay.¹⁰ "I think essentially what any insurgency is about is consent and it's consent of the local population."¹¹ On November 12, a British armored battlegroup – roughly a battalion-sized unit with 50 armored vehicles, encircled the southeast area of the town of Musa Qala. Patrols inched forward toward the town, and by early December were operating less than two miles from the town center.

The final assault left little to tactical chance. It began on the afternoon of December 7. That evening, a battalion of the U.S. 82nd Airborne was airlifted to positions on the hills north of the town and worked their way through the outer ring of Taliban defenses there. Afghan forces and 2,000 British troops, with additional backing from Danish and Estonian units, closed in from the east, west and south. With Musa Qala all but surrounded, air strikes targeted Taliban positions in the town.

The next day a patient advance began, slowed largely by the need to clear Taliban minefields; improvised explosive devices also killed several British and U.S. troops. As the operation to retake Musa Qala neared its climax, Gordon Brown paid a visit to Camp Bastion, reflecting again the iconic quality of the operation. "I know that we can win in Musa Qala," the prime minister said. "I know the work you are doing today and over the next few days is important to the whole mission in Afghanistan. I believe, if we can succeed there, which we will, and we can work with the Afghan forces, then we can move forward to a more peaceful future for this country."¹²

⁹ Julian Borger and Declan Walsh, "UK backs plan to split Taliban from within," *The Guardian*, October 15, 2007, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/oct/15/politics.military>.

¹⁰ "52 Infantry Brigade hit the ground running in Helmand," Defence News, U.K. Ministry of Defence, at <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/MilitaryOperations/52InfantryBrigadeHitTheGroundRunningInHelmand.htm>

¹¹ "UK's Helmand Commander Positive on Progress in Southern Afghanistan," *BritainUSA*, at http://britainusa.com/sections/articles_show_nt1.asp?d=0&i=60063&L1=0&a=47605.

¹² Sam Coates and Nick Meo, "Gordon Brown visits Afghanistan as Taleban stronghold falls," *The Times of London*, December 10, 2007, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3028426.ece>.

The Taliban retreated from one prepared position to the next, but on December 10 press reports indicated that the Taliban were fleeing northward; the next day NATO announced the town's fall, though the British were more cautious, emphasizing "compound to compound" clearing operations. By December 12 the fight was over.¹³

If British and NATO forces had taken few chances in retaking Musa Qala, the prospects for holding the town and embarking on the arduous task of reconstruction would be a tougher challenge. And if the British now better understood the challenge, that didn't make the job easier. As the United States was discovering through its own trials and errors in Afghanistan and Iraq, the ability of British diplomats and development officers to buttress military success was unproven or, at best, limited. The capabilities of the Kabul government were similarly limited, especially beyond the Afghan National Army.

The Karzai government did grasp the need for such efforts, at least. "I have come here to Helmand with full hands," Afghanistan's Minister for Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Mohammad Ehsan Zia, told local tribal leaders on January 17, 2008. "I have money, lots of money, particularly for Musa Qala. Just ask for as much money as you need, and the ministry's provincial head will give it to you." Tribal leaders stressed how critical reconstruction would be. "You must help Musa Qala as soon as possible," responded Hajji Zaher, representing the Alizai tribal council, but he also made clear how little credibility the central government had: "If you do what you did before and ignore this district, then you will lose the people's trust."¹⁴

Some of the Alizai were no doubt satisfied to see Mullah Salaam named as district governor early in January. His fighters had not done much to reclaim Musa Qala, but his defection had been something of a political coup and lent some degree of legitimacy – how much remains unclear – to the coalition. He made a strong initial impression on the British, at least. "The first time we heard Mullah Salaam speak he spoke bloody well," recounted Maj. Guy Bartle-Jones, who headed the British military stabilization team.

*In fact, he dominated the whole show. He gave the government message: anti-Taliban, counter-narcotics, interspersed with Koranic verses. He came across as an accomplished politician, far away from the reports from Kabul, where he had been pilloried as a fraught and frantic man.*¹⁵

The British also understand that the reconstruction of Musa Qala is a test of their new approach to counterinsurgency, what is now known among NATO governments as the "Comprehensive Approach." One of the main lines of British effort is winning the

¹³ "Afghan flag flies over Musa Qaleh once again," Defence News, U.K. Ministry of Defence, at <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/MilitaryOperations/AfghanFlagFliesOverMusaQalehOnceAgain.htm>.

¹⁴ "Making Musa Qala Work," Afghan Recovery Report, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 17, 2008, at http://www.iwpr.net/index.php?apc_state=hen&s=o&o=l=EN&p=arr&s=f&o=342021.

¹⁵ Hershel Smith, "Our Deal With Mullah Abdul Salaam," Captain's Journal, January 14, 2008, at <http://www.captainsjournal.com/2008/01/14/our-deal-with-mullah-abdul-salaam>

information war; the British have established an FM radio station that broadcasts news of military activities, anti-Taliban messages – music and movies, almost any form of public entertainment is effectively anti-Taliban propaganda. A British Army psychological operations officer, Capt. Christian Howard, noted that even Indian-made “Bollywood” films are subversive: “[W]atching people dancing is like watching porn to them. Musa Qala is as hardline as its gets.”¹⁶

Other agencies of the British government are straining to support the military effort. For the first time, there is a Musa Qala branch of the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, as well as representatives from the Helmand Civil and Military Cooperation team. A half-mile stretch of the main road in town has been paved, a new generator installed and schools opened. “Since December [2007] there has been an extraordinary amount achieved, not only militarily, but also in the establishment of governance within Musa Qala,” claimed Capt. Philip Adams, “We now have a functioning government which is interacting with the people.”¹⁷

Yet, even as the British accelerate reconstruction efforts, security remains an unresolved issue. Several suicide bombers have struck the town. The British Army owns the town proper, but the Taliban may still control redoubts and villages within 15 miles. Residents “believe the Taliban will return,” one Musa Qala resident recently told *Jane’s Terrorism & Insurgency News*. “That is why they do not support the local officials. They can see the presence of the Taliban, so how can they be able to help or join the government?”¹⁸ Another was more direct. “We don’t want schools,” a villager told *The Afghan Recovery Report*.

*We don’t want reconstruction of the roads. The only thing we want is security. When the Taliban start fighting with the government, the only thing that happens is that innocent people are killed. [The Taliban] may lose ten people, but dozens and dozens of civilians die.*¹⁹

James Holland’s recent reporting confirms the uncertainty of conditions in Musa Qala. Under the Taliban, “we had security,” a villager named Salim Mohammed told him, “and no corruption.” Did that mean life in Musa Qala was better under the Taliban? “Not better,” Salim Mohammed replied, “but there was security.” Salim Mohammed believed that the future might be better, but only “as long as the British stay.”²⁰

¹⁶ “Battle to break the grip of Taliban terror in Musa Qala, The Herald, August 18, 2008, at http://www.theherald.co.uk/news/focus/display.var.2393050.0.Battle_to_break_the_grip_of_Taliban_terror_in_Musa_Qala.php

¹⁷ “Reconstruction and development continue apace in Musa Qaleh,” *Defence News*, UK Ministry of Defence, April 2, 2008 at <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/MilitaryOperations/ReconstructionAndDevelopmentContinueApaceInMusaQaleh.htm>

¹⁸ “The battle for Musa Qala,” for Jane’s Intelligence & Insurgency News, April 8, 2008, at http://www.janes.com/news/security/terrorism/jts/jtsm080404_1_n.shtml

¹⁹ Making Musa Qala Work,” *Afghan Recovery Report*, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 17, 2008, at http://www.iwpr.net/index.php?apc_state=hen&s=o&o=l=EN&p=arr&s=f&o=342021.

²⁰ James, Holland, “Dispatches: Musa Qala, Afghanistan,” op. cit.

In contrast to the posture of 2006, the British Army has about 350 soldiers in Musa Qala, and is patrolling aggressively in outlying districts, but there has been constant combat. Musa Qala thus remains an icon, a test of endurance, strength, and willpower. As one British soldier told a reporter in July, “The Taliban will not be happy. We’re right in their stomping ground. This is their safe haven.”²¹ The British Army has paid a heavy price to retake and hold Musa Qala, and the prospects for a quick transfer of power to or stable governance by the Afghan government, in the person of Mullah Salaam, Helmand Governor Asadullah Wafa or officials from Kabul are not good – they could as easily exacerbate problems as solve them. In Musa Qala as elsewhere in Helmand, the salient questions are how long the British stay and what they make of the time.

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²¹ Sean Rayment, “Afghanistan: The ‘forgotten’ war is back in the spotlight, *The Telegraph*, July 21, 2008 at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/onthefrontline/2435898/Afghanistan-The-forgotten-war-is-back-in-the-spotlight.html>.

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