

Operation Moshtarak: Lessons Learned



Refugees from Marjah, in Lashkar Gah

March 2010

Executive Summary

NATO's Operation Moshtarak, launched in February 2010 in Helmand province, was the first deployment after the beginning of the much-debated surge of 30,000 additional US troops. It was billed as the largest military operation since the invasion of 2001. The planning for the operation emphasised the needs of the Afghan people, and the importance of winning hearts and minds as part of a classic counter-insurgency operation. However, the reality on the ground did not match the rhetoric. Welcome improvements in the size and conduct of military operations were undermined by a lack of sufficient corresponding measures in the political and humanitarian campaigns.

This report reviews the local perceptions of the operation from more than 400 Afghan men from Marjah, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar, interviewed by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) in March 2010.

ICOS field research reveals that Operation Moshtarak has contributed to high levels of anger among local Afghan: **61% of those interviewed feel more negative about NATO forces than before the military offensive.** In other words, the objective of winning "hearts and minds" - one of the fundamental tenets of the new counter-insurgency strategy - was not met.

The findings of the report reveal three key "lessons learned" which will be critical to the success of the upcoming offensive in Kandahar: tackling Taliban recruitment; refugee support and aid capacity and deliverables; and management of the grassroots political dynamics.

The legitimate grievances of the people of Marjah are being exploited by the Taliban, who will seek to recruit and radicalise the region's angry young men. Of those interviewed, **95% believe more young Afghans have joined the Taliban** in the last year. **78% of the respondents were often or always angry**, and 45% of those stated they were angry at the NATO occupation, civilian casualties and night raids.

Operation Moshtarak and similar operations in the future provide a perfect propaganda tool for use by the Taliban in their recruitment strategies, unless the conduct of such operations is changed to address legitimate grievances through deploying what this report characterises as "*non-violent security instruments*" within a "security eco-system" concept. This mandates managing all operations (military, aid and political) with an understanding that an action in one area affects dynamics in another area. Additionally, the report recommends the adoption of a new "**Counter-insurgency Impact Equation - Balance any negative impact with a positive impact; Ensure that the positive impact is greater than the negative impact.**"

Refugee support and aid capacity must be strengthened dramatically. Despite widespread advanced planning and publicity regarding Operation Moshtarak, there were, in the end, very little aid or infrastructure available for displaced persons. **97% of Afghans interviewed by ICOS said that the operation had led to new flows of internally displaced people.** Thousands of displaced Afghans were forced to move to non-existent or overcrowded refugee camps with insufficient food, medical supplies or shelter. Local aid agencies were overwhelmed, and in some areas were not present at all.

Another issue causing friction with the local population is the lack of an effective or realistic counter-narcotics strategy. Poppy crop eradication - which took place during the operation - and a new policy of paying poppy farmers to eradicate their crops themselves, undermines the local economy without putting sustainable alternatives in place. **Eradicating the poppy crop is opposed by 66% of Afghans interviewed by ICOS.**

59% of those interviewed believed the Taliban will return to Marjah after the Operation. Alarmingly, 67% did not support a strong NATO-ISAF presence in their province and 71% stated they wanted the NATO forces to leave.

Furthermore, 67% of those interviewed stated they did not believe NATO and the Afghan government would win against the Taliban, with 14% saying that NATO would “never” win.

However, 67% want NATO forces to clear the ring road from Lashkar Gah to Kandahar to Kabul, and start an operation against insurgents in Kandahar, indicating the importance of these issues to the local population. There is an “agreement on ends but not means”: locals do not want the Taliban to return but they also do not want to endure unnecessary suffering as part of NATO’s response to the insurgency.

To learn from these experiences, new approaches must be taken *in advance* of the Kandahar operation to support the offensive. The report recommends a coordinated series of “**Dramatic Positive Local Actions**” before, during, and after the Kandahar operation which will engage with grassroots communities and prevent the generation of more animosity towards the NATO presence and the Afghan government.

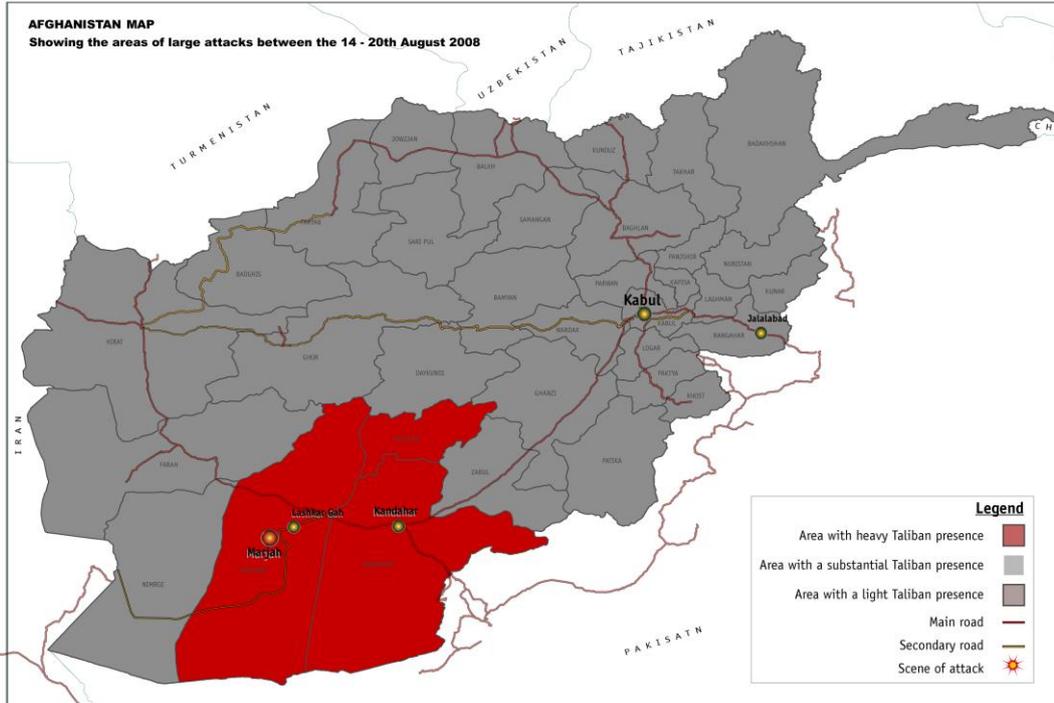
To prevent a repeat of Operation Moshtarak, NATO and the international community must deploy a series of short and long term initiatives. To tackle Taliban recruitment, marriage and land allowance schemes should be established to tie young Afghans into stable social and economic structures.

To strengthen humanitarian aid capacity, a series of fully resourced aid initiatives should be rolled out, starting with fully-equipped field hospitals and ambulance system. These measures should also include “**camps in a box**” to provide shelter, food, water and active engagement with displaced people to help them move to the camps or, when possible, to return to their homes. A **surge of food aid capacity** is needed. Aid agencies should be integrated into military planning processes, provided with the resources and capacity necessary to deal with the needs at hand, and if necessary, NATO forces should be integrated into relief and aid activities.

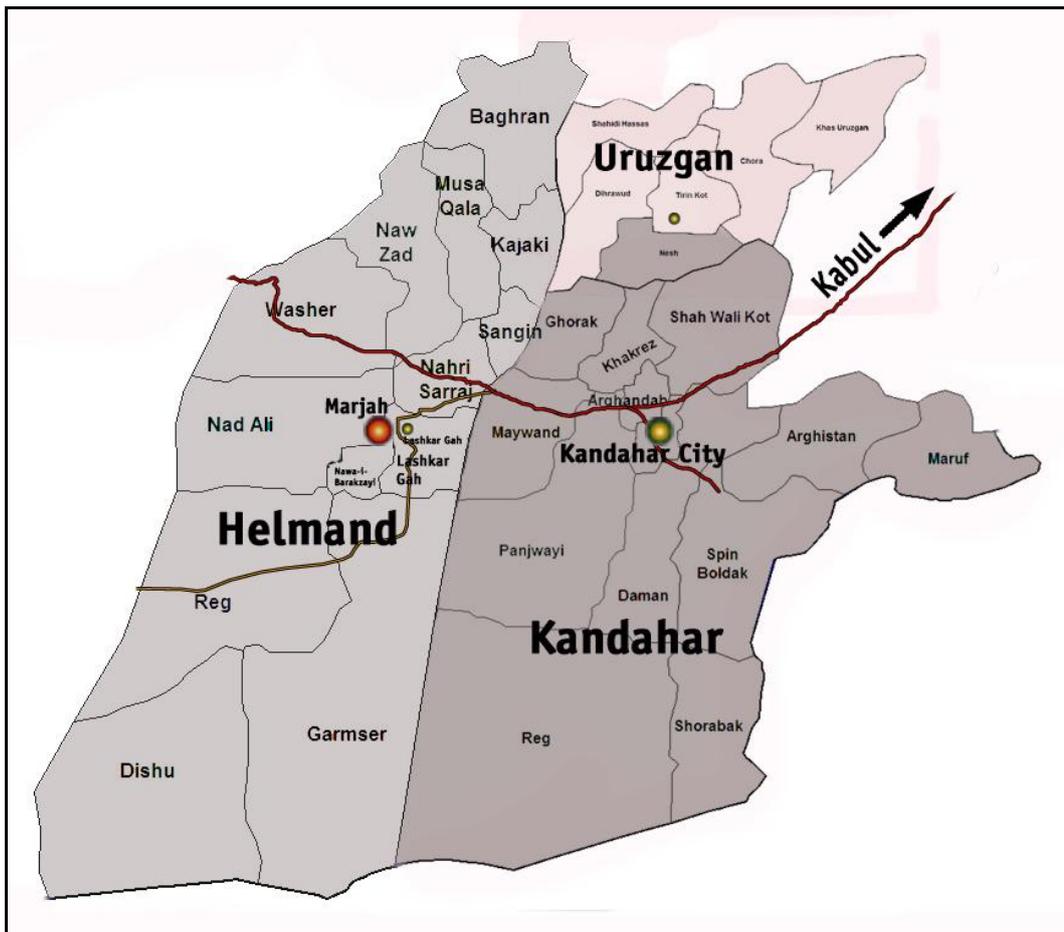
As part of this series of “Dramatic Positive Local Actions”, NATO should engage decisively with grassroots communities on the issue of religious respect and anger related to Afghan civilian casualties caused by NATO military actions. This process should include **symbolic cultural and political acts** linked to public statements of apology; programmes such as a mosque restore and shrines restoration, and Quran distribution schemes. These are intended to demonstrate in a dramatic grass roots political way, commitment to the Afghan people and build support for the international presence in what has become a hyper-politicized community. The dynamics at the local level must be changed dramatically and in the very short term, in advance of the Kandahar operations.

NATO and the international community have made mistakes, but their presence in Afghanistan is not a mistake, and neither is the recent surge. The policy mix is not working, and this has to be dramatically renovated in the very short term. Learning lessons from Marjah is critical for the success of the upcoming operation in Kandahar. Urgent steps must be taken to dramatically reshape local relationships, and prevent a repeat of the negative impacts of Operation Moshtarak in Kandahar.

Operation Moshtarak: Lessons Learned
May 2010



Helmand and Kandahar provinces



Locations of Marjah and Kandahar City

Overview of Operation Moshtarak

The main focus of Operation Moshtarak was on the Nad Ali district of Helmand province, targeting in particular the area of Marjah, which for several years had been under the control of the Taliban. Up to 15,000 American, British, other coalition forces and Afghan troops were deployed for the operation. The offensive has been described as the largest in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban government in October-December 2001.

The target of 30,000 additional US troops announced by President Barack Obama is a welcome and necessary addition to the international presence. Only with a sufficient military footprint can NATO forces hold ground taken from the insurgents and begin taking the initiative from the Taliban.

The offensive was extensively planned in advance, and the emphasis was placed on protecting the Afghan people. Above all, Operation Moshtarak was to be Afghan-led. Afghan security forces were placed in the frontline alongside NATO combat troops, and Afghan officials were on standby as a “government in a box” ready to provide administration and services after the district fell.

However, these welcome improvements in the conduct of military operations were undermined by a lack of corresponding measures in the political campaign and development support.

Research Reveals Serious Post-Operation Issues

In March 2010, the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) conducted a series of interviews in Lashkar Gah district, near Marjah in Helmand province, and in Kandahar city in Kandahar province. Those interviewed included displaced families from Marjah. Prior field research was carried out in Lashkar Gah in October 2009.¹ In March, ICOS interviewed 427 Afghan men, and asked a range of closed and open-ended questions to establish their reactions to Operation Moshtarak, as well as their opinions on the Taliban insurgency, the NATO presence, and forced poppy crop eradication.² The results reveal that the offensive has had negative results, and has exposed the challenges that still need to be overcome by the ‘new’ international strategy.

These interviews build on previous ICOS field research in Afghanistan, as well as in Iraq and Somalia. The interviews indicate that a lack of attention and support to effective aid, developmental and economic instruments and counter-narcotics policies has contributed to alienating and radicalising populations in affected conflict zones. The latest ICOS field research supports this view, and raises troubling questions about the support for Operation Moshtarak, and lessons that must be learned and addressed in advance of planned operations in Kandahar.

The main lesson that emerges from this series of interviews with Afghans, some of whom were directly affected by Operation Moshtarak, is not in improving military tactics but, rather, in focusing the efforts of the international community and the Afghan government in three key areas:

- **Taliban recruitment:** the insurgency continues to benefit in their recruitment efforts from the mistakes of the international coalition.
- **Refugee and aid response and capacity:** removing Taliban influence must be accompanied by the timely and effective delivery of emergency aid and refugee assistance, as well as longer-term developmental initiatives.

¹ Using a group of 100 Afghan men.

² The results of open-ended questions were grouped into selected categories.

- **Grassroots political dynamics:** NATO engagement with local Afghan communities is very weak, and lacks a positive grassroots political dynamic. Although there is now recognition of the community-level anger caused by civilian casualties, night raids and poppy crop eradication, the response to this dynamic has not been sufficient and has not addressed these dynamics in an effective way.

A. Taliban Recruitment: Drawing from Afghanistan's Angry Young Men

Rising numbers of young Afghans joining the Taliban

The lack of humanitarian forward planning for Operation Moshtarak undermined one of the fundamental tenets of the new counter-insurgency strategy: that the hearts and minds of the population must be at the centre of any military operation. Military force is still the predominant element in the Western counter-insurgency strategy.

These flaws have created serious blow-back: the legitimate grievances of the people of Marjah now risk being exploited by insurgent groups, which have already been gaining in strength.³

Q1 Over the last year, do you think more young Afghans have joined the Taliban?		
Yes	409	95.8%
No	13	3.0%
No opinion / Don't know	2	0.5%
No answer	3	0.7%

These insurgent groups will use the opportunity to increase their recruitment efforts, particularly among the many thousands of displaced people. The refugee camp in Lashkar Gah was already a key Taliban recruitment site. With the influx of thousands more civilians, who have been forced from their homes by NATO actions, the prospects for Taliban recruitment will become stronger.

Just over half of Afghans interviewed believe that a significant reason that many young men are now joining the Taliban now is because of jihad – their legitimate grievances are being expressed through extremist action against the 'occupying' foreign forces. Once radicalised, these angry young men will be much harder to draw back into legitimate life.

³ For an excellent overview of the dynamics surrounding the Taliban resurgence see A. Giustozzi, *Decoding the Neo-Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*. Columbia University Press, 2009.

Q2 Why do you think other Afghan men join the Taliban?		
Job or Money	242	57%
Jihad	229	54%
Social status	155	36%
Coerced into doing so	147	34%
International Occupation	34	8%
Actions of the Afghan government	6	1%
Lack of security	5	1%
Afghan politics	3	1%
Other	3	1%
Lack of education	2	0%

Angry Young Men – A Ready Source of Taliban Recruits

Although the Taliban leadership is composed of ideologically committed individuals, the majority of the rank and file recruits and occasional collaborators do not usually share the ideological or political convictions of the leadership (see diagram).



ICOS field research reveals that young men, who are often unemployed, unmarried, and disenfranchised, make up the majority of these rank and file recruits, because they are the most susceptible to recruitment by insurgent groups.⁴

There is a high proportion of these young men in Afghanistan – 47.9% of the male population is aged between 15 and 29, a phenomenon known as the youth bulge, which is found in many conflict zones. Afghanistan is also characterised by a weak and unstable labour market: according to the country's Central Statistics Organisation, 90% of jobs can be classified as vulnerable employment that do not provide stable, secure income.⁵

⁴ Fotini, C and Semple, M 'Flipping the Taliban: How to Win in Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009.

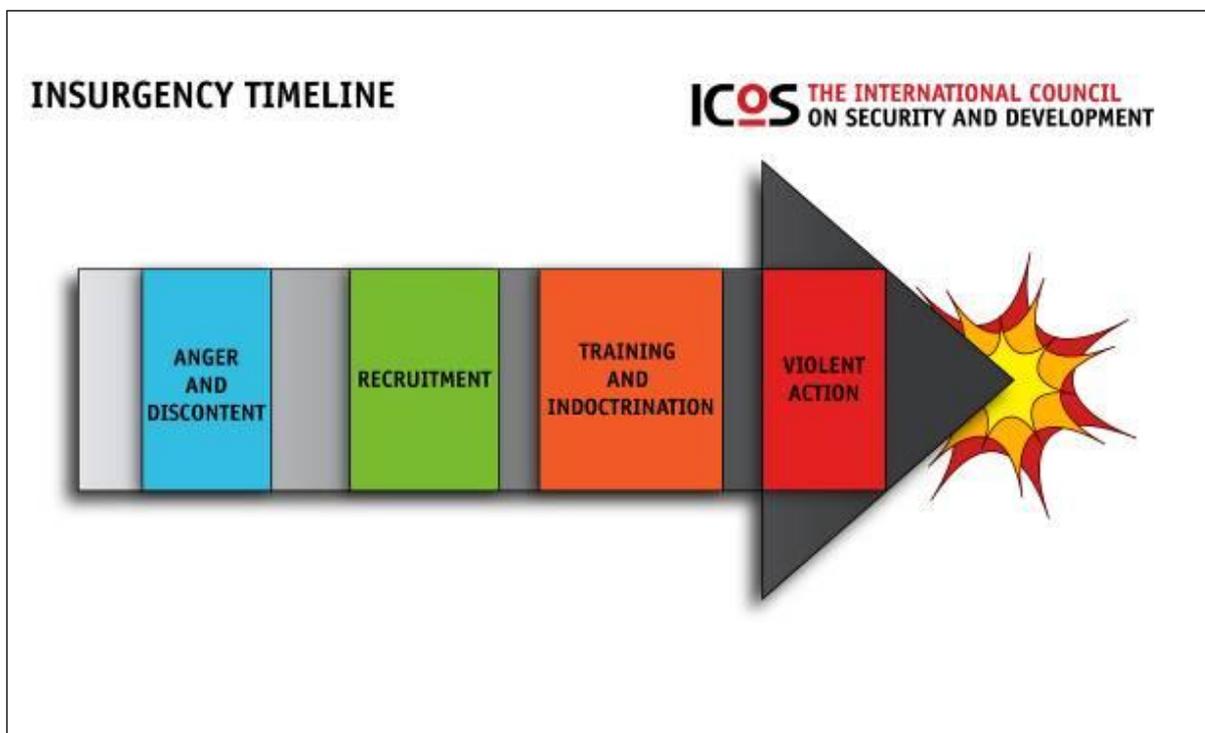
⁵ Central Statistics Organisation, *The National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) 2007/2008*. Available at <http://nrva.cso.gov.af/>

Many of these angry young men join insurgent groups for a regular income and a sense of empowerment and identity they cannot find elsewhere, rather than for ideological reasons. In Afghanistan these young men have a number of serious, legitimate grievances - corruption, civilian casualties, a lack of jobs and services, and a failure to establish the rule of law – which have created high levels of anger among civilian populations.

What is the Recruitment Timeline?

- **Anger and Discontent:** The lack of social and economic opportunities causes frustration and feelings of alienation among young men.
- **Recruitment:** Faced with these bleak prospects, the Angry Young Men become easy targets for insurgent recruiters who offer an alternative vision.
- **Training and Indoctrination:** In this stage, the recruits move from being passive supporters of the insurgency to active participation in it through indoctrination.
- **Violent Action:** The new recruits have been formed into insurgent fighters ready to commit violent acts against all enemies of their cause, for example, as suicide bombers, regular fighters or employed to plant road side bombs or kidnap foreigners. We normally only engage these young men with military and police actions in this stage.

This process is illustrated in the timeline below:

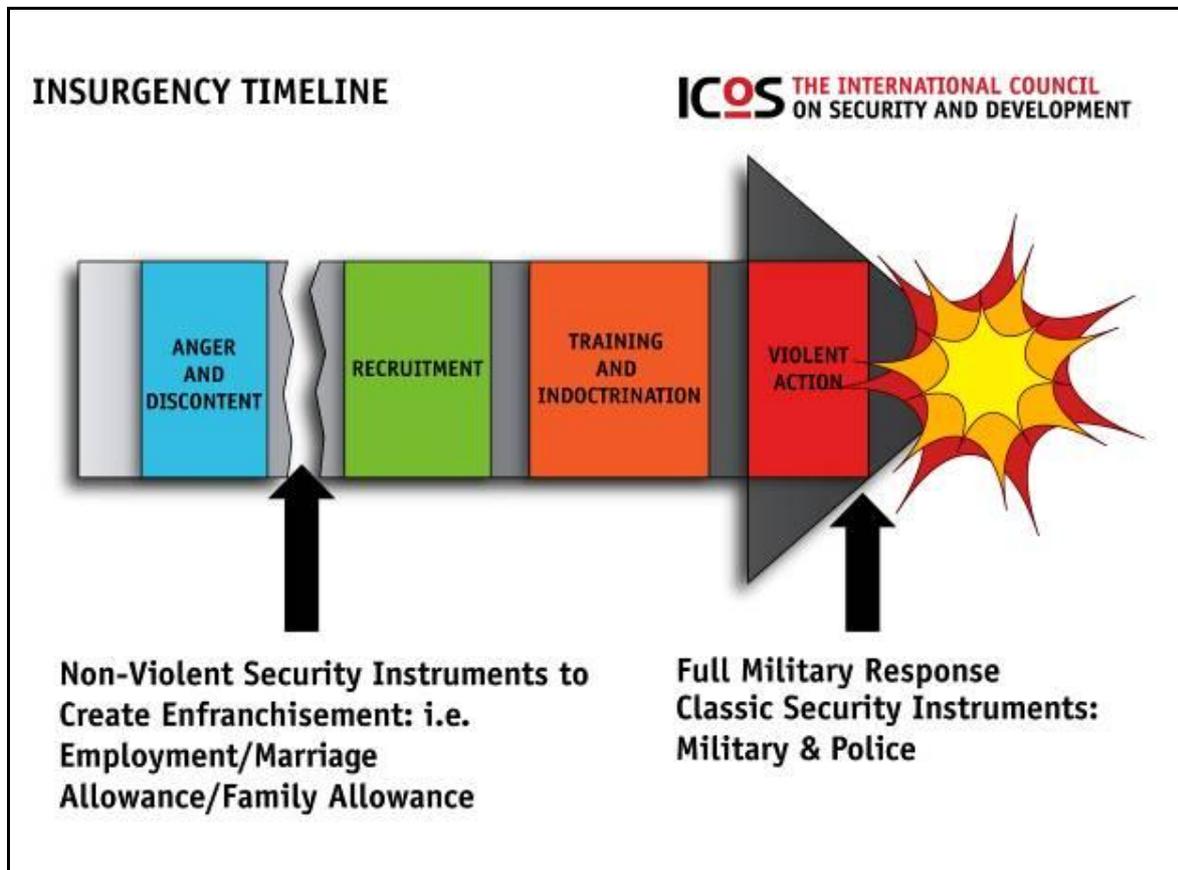


Enfranchisement of Angry Young Men using Non-Violent Security Instruments

In any country, youths need a combination of self-respect and a sense of worth, a relevant, contributing role in the community, the ability to provide for oneself and one's family, and a sense of belonging. Policies and measures that can help young men acquire this sense of "enfranchisement", and deter them from being recruited by violent actors, should be considered as "Non-Violent Security Instruments" (NVSIs).

First, it is crucial to engage with potential insurgents in the earliest stage. In this phase, disaffected youths are still capable of being integrated into society. Second, it is important to look at each community that is vulnerable to recruitment and consider a tailored package of necessary measures - marriage or family allowances, educational opportunities, meaningful employment, or home ownership.⁶

The diagram below shows how the deployment of these NVSIs can interfere with the recruitment and radicalisation process in southern Afghanistan.



These Non Violent Security Instruments must be given the same political and financial support as classic security instruments such a military and police actions.

Examples of Non-Violent Security Instruments to be considered when addressing the needs of local communities in Afghanistan include:

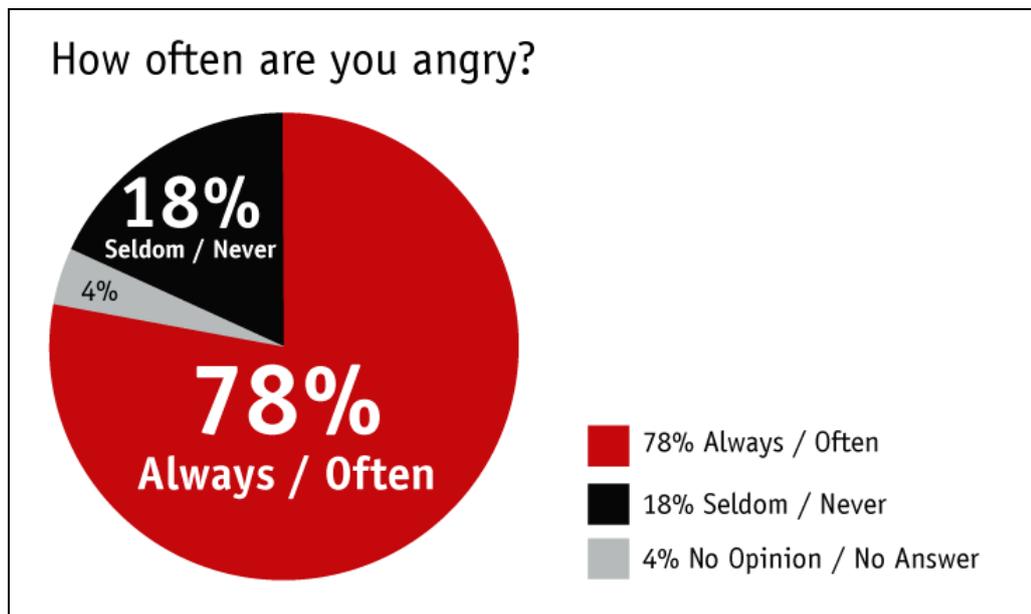
- Marriage allowances and grants for necessary wedding celebrations (In southern Afghanistan these costs range from \$3000 to \$5000, a sum out of the reach of the average young Afghan man, especially given high levels of unemployment and underemployment.)
- Family allowances and grants for new families on the birth of their first child, to encourage building a family and related social stability.
- Housing allowances and programmes to support the construction of independent housing for the new family, along with land allotments for residences and businesses (drawing on the model of land titling, as used in Peru)

⁶ Fick, N and Lockhart, C (2010) *The Economic Imperative: Stabilising Afghanistan Through Economic Growth*. Center for a New American Security Policy Brief. Available at: http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/Economic%20Imperative_FickLockhart_April2010_code507_policybrief.pdf

- Monthly stipends for poor families which could follow the example of the “Bolsa Familia” poverty alleviation programme in Brazil
- A widespread, dramatic programme of micro-financing, as well as capital grants to small- and medium-size businesses

Anger Levels Rising as a Result of Operation Moshtarak

78% of Afghans interviewed by ICOS “often or always” feel angry. This figure is up from previous ICOS research: interviews conducted from May-July 2008 indicated that 39% of men interviewed felt angry all the time. Now, with Marjah’s opium economy being strangled by international and Afghan action, these disenfranchised and disaffected citizens will have even fewer ways to make a living or support their families. The subsequent anger and discontent, makes the young men of Marjah susceptible to recruitment and radicalisation by insurgent groups.

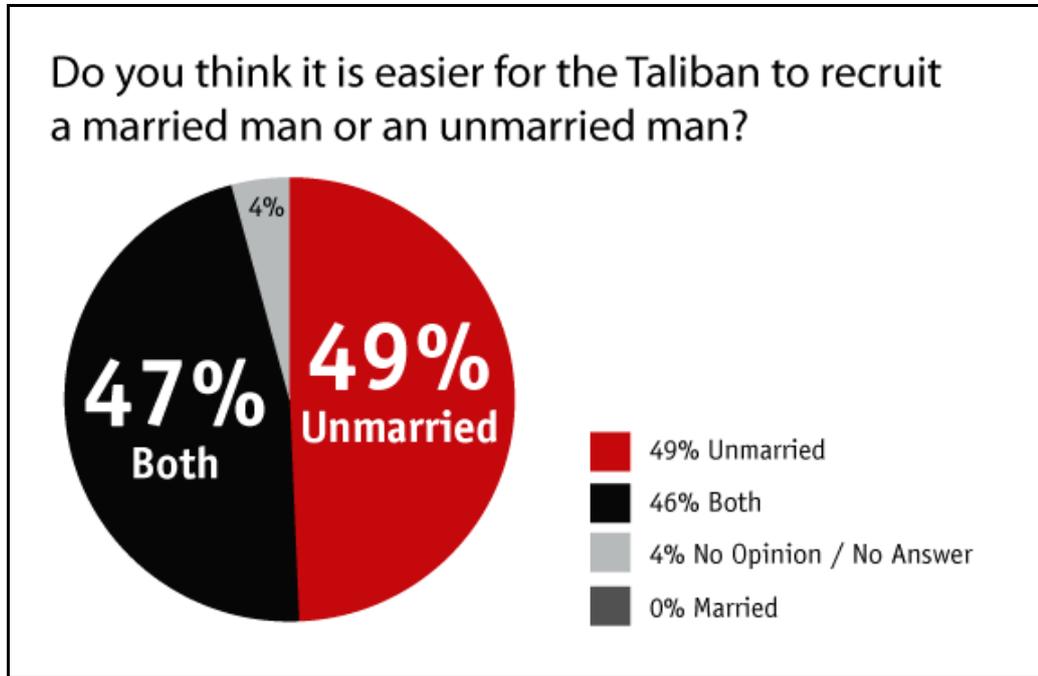


Q 5A Who or what are you angry with?		
NATO-ISAF: occupation, civilian casualties, night raids	239	45%
War and lack of security	185	35%
Taliban: killings, suicide bombers, IEDs	46	9%
No Answer	29	6%
Personal situation	11	2%
The role of Pakistan	11	2%
General situation in the country	7	1%
Afghan government	6	1%
Lashkar Gah-Kandahar Highway	5	1%
Poppy field eradication	5	1%
Unemployment / Poverty	3	1%
Corruption	2	0.4%

⁷ Due to methodological problems, this question omits 100 interviews from Kandahar and 125 from Lashkar Gah in March.

Interfering with the Taliban recruitment process

In particular, unmarried men lack the social and economic responsibilities that married men have, making them more vulnerable to recruitment by insurgents. This is supported by the research: half of Afghans interviewed believe that the Taliban can recruit single men more easily than married men.



In the medium and long term, policies to limit the appeal of the Taliban among the young men of Marjah would prevent the insurgents from returning and establishing a foothold.

Q 4 What can we do to avoid young people from joining the Taliban?		
Money to allow them to get married and start a family	352	82%
Jobs	318	74%
Withdrawal of NATO-ISAF forces	192	45%
Better security	169	40%
Education	107	25%
Change the conduct of NATO-ISAF forces	12	3%
Other	5	1%
Reconstruction of the country	3	1%
No answer	6	1%

For instance, 82% of Afghans interviewed believe that financially supporting unmarried men to get married would be an effective method of stopping them from being recruited by the Taliban. This would provide them with social and financial responsibilities as well as a sense of empowerment, reducing the attractiveness of joining an insurgent group.

Addressing the needs of the people of Marjah and Kandahar through Non-Violent Security Instruments

Sufficient time, planning and financial backing should have been provided in Operation Moshtarak for implementing Non-Violent Security Instruments (NVSIs). These NVSIs, including measures such as refugee aid, effective counter-narcotics policies, the preparation of suitable refugee camps, and medical assistance, must be integrated into military responses in Afghanistan, and should have been accorded the same level of support as classic security instruments during Operation Moshtarak.

The cost of these measures – these “camps in a box” - compared to the military effort is extremely small, and the return on this investment in this environment can be much higher than the money spent on direct military action.

Incorporating NVSIs into the international community’s planning process for Operation Moshtarak would have reduced the anger of the civilian population, limiting the Taliban’s ability to recruit and radicalise Marjah’s angry young men. The lack of relief assistance and the resulting humanitarian crisis has handed a free propaganda victory to the insurgency, which can now use streams of refugees and unwarranted civilian casualties as evidence of NATO’s ‘brutal occupation’.

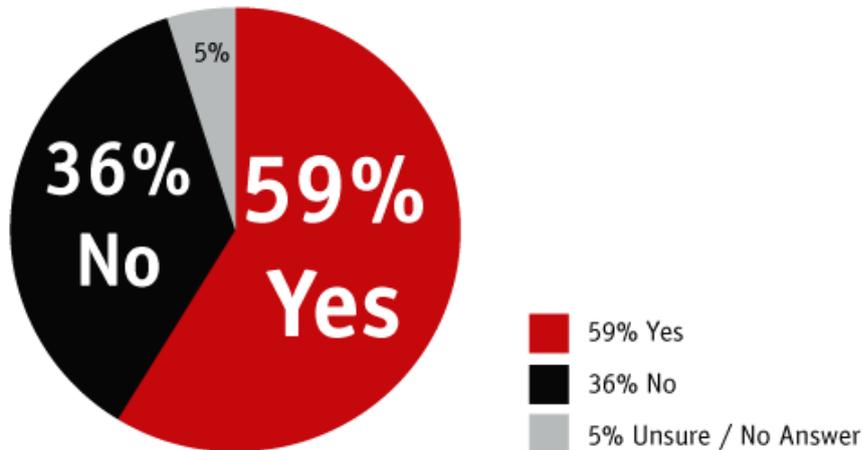
This humanitarian system would have provided a temporary ‘bridge’ of non-violent security measures between the NATO assault and the establishment of the “government in a box”, which would provide governance and services.

It must be recognised by all parties that, in complex and insecure situations, aid agencies might not be the best actor to deliver these essential humanitarian supplies for security or capacity reasons. In those circumstances NATO is the only agency in the region with the capability to deploy aid and relief programmes, and all relevant agencies should be prepared to have NATO forces deliver these programmes until the humanitarian and aid agencies have the capacity and willingness to do so.

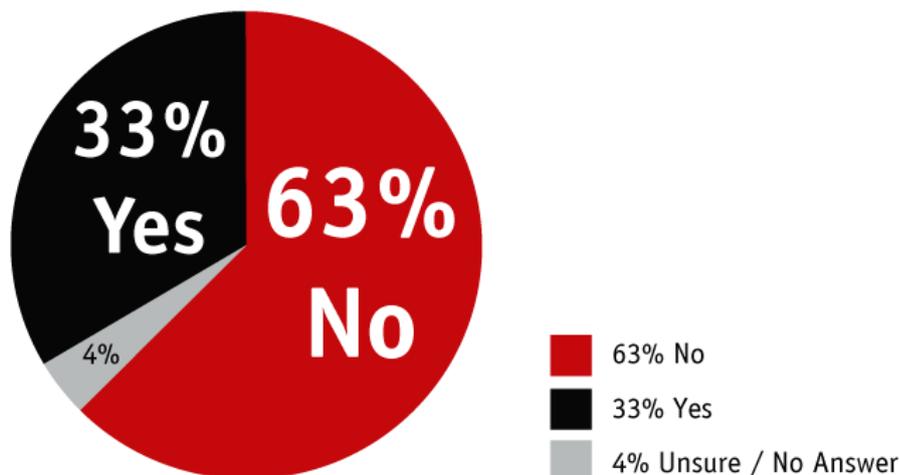
On the other hand, 63% of Afghans interviewed by ICOS do not believe that paying the insurgents off would cause them to leave the Taliban. 59% of Afghans interviewed believe that providing jobs to Taliban fighters will draw them away from the insurgency. However, the Afghan economy is already struggling to provide employment to citizens who are not connected to the insurgency. Creating new jobs would be a formidable challenge.⁸

⁸ Felbab-Brown, V (2010) *Negotiations And Reconciliation With The Taliban: The Key Policy Issues and Dilemmas*. Brookings Institute. Available at:
http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/articles/2010/0128_taliban_felbabbrown/0128_taliban_felbabbrown.pdf

Do you think Taliban fighters will leave the Taliban if you give them a job?



Do you think Taliban fighters will leave the Taliban if the government pays them?



A Security Eco-System – Getting the Right Balance for Stability

Acknowledging the role of NVSIs must be combined with a “*security eco-system approach*”. Security must be viewed – in Marjah, Kandahar and elsewhere – as a comprehensive framework incorporating a balance between elements such as military force, development, justice, humanitarian assistance, and socio-economic activity. This balance must be determined by the “natural habitat” of the conflict area – its political, economic, and social context. Long-term environmental sustainability is dependent on a finely tuned balance between different elements within the natural eco-system; similarly, long-term security is dependent on a targeted combination of appropriate strategies. All the elements in the eco-system (military, development, aid, political affairs) are connected one to another – and an action or reaction in one area affects the other areas.

Applying a *security eco-system* approach in Marjah – and in the upcoming Kandahar operation - is essential to demonstrate that the international community can find a sustainable approach to the larger crisis in Afghanistan.

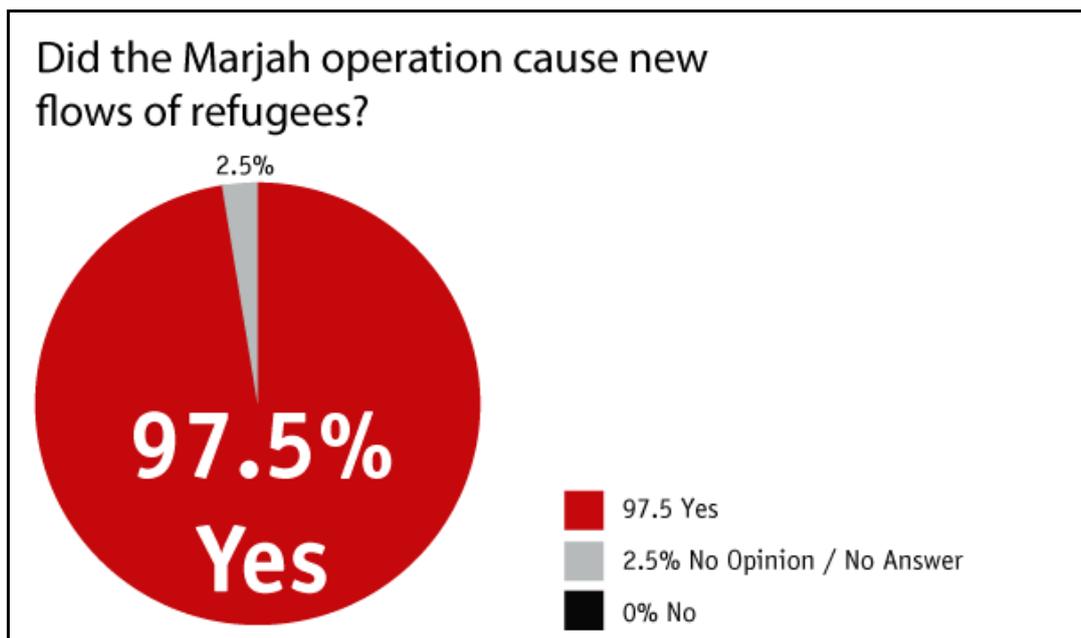
B. Responding to Refugees; Strengthening Development and Aid Capacity

The weeks of prior planning for Operation Moshtarak were a welcome step by NATO to raise awareness among the Afghan people of the upcoming offensive. However, there was a dramatic lack of capacity and preparation in the development and political communities for the humanitarian consequences of Operation Moshtarak. The policy mix robustly deployed military instruments in an environment with weak humanitarian, social, and economic tools and capacity.

The United States defence establishment is well aware of the institutional difficulties which underpin these failings. In a recent article for *Foreign Affairs*, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates acknowledged the need for much more coherent planning process, which would allow US assistance in conflict zones to be delivered more effectively.⁹

High numbers of refugees

Large numbers of refugees fled the conflict zone, many of them to Lashkar Gah and the informal refugee camps around and inside the city. There is no consensus on the number of refugees who fled (see box below): the numbers are estimated at between 3,500 and 4,000 families. The presence of displaced people is supported by interviewees, almost all of whom stated that the operation had caused new flows of refugees.



Figures suggest that the average size of a poor Afghan household is eight people, meaning that more than 30,000 refugees have probably left their homes. Anecdotal evidence from ICOS field research reveals that many families were forced to walk many kilometres in the middle of the night, through dangerous conditions and at risk from landmines and roadside bombs.

⁹ Gates, R (2010) 'Helping Others Defend Themselves: The Future of US Security Assistance' *Foreign Affairs* May/June 2010.

“Exact figures [for refugees] are hard to come by, but the number of displaced families still unable to return to their homes following the fighting runs into the thousands”.

International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, March 5¹⁰

UN and other aid agencies were also overwhelmed. Although 15 aid agencies were asked to assist with supporting refugees within Lashkar Gah, only two – the International Committee for the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and the Afghan Red Crescent Society – had responsibility for areas outside Lashkar Gah.

No relief organisations appear to have had any existing capacity within Marjah itself, and none of them had or were provided with sufficient resources, staff, or information to assess and care for the tide of displaced people. Food, shelter, and medical supplies were in extremely short supply, contributing to serious anger and resentment among the refugees and the local population who witnessed their plight.

“Most of the refugees left with only their children. They left everything behind. They need help.”

Mohibullah Khan, police officer

Despite the extensive publicity which the operation received, aid agencies do not appear to have been briefed or consulted sufficiently in advance, or given appropriate resources to respond to the needs of the community.

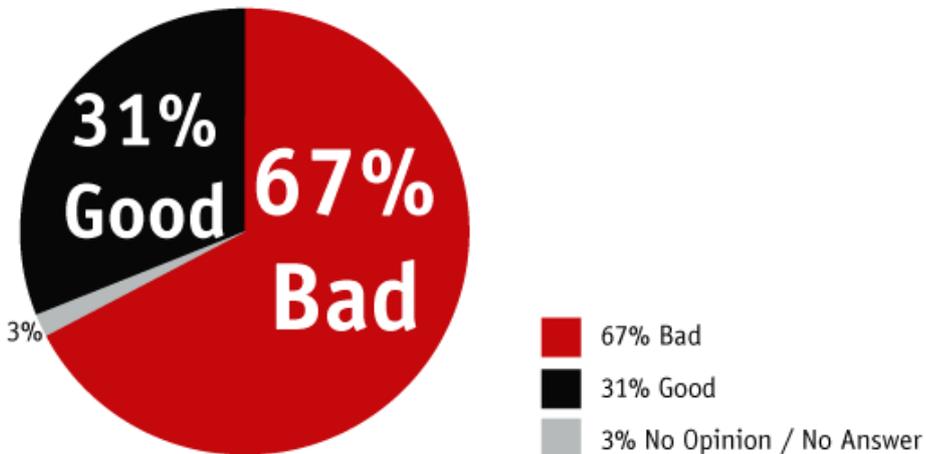
The principal demand expressed by 70% of Afghans interviewed is the immediate provision of help from NATO, the international community and the Afghan government: they expect shelter and food for the refugees, the rebuilding of destroyed property and the clearing of landmines. As already confirmed in previous reports on the security and development situation in Afghanistan, the needs of the Afghan people often are more basic than illustrated by the international political discourse: first and foremost, the Afghan people ask for the provision of basic services like food, shelter and medical assistance for their families.

In a situations where the aid community is unable to meet the needs of the local population during military operations, military forces should be delegated responsibility for the aid effort, as the only actor with the resources and access to deploy across the conflict zone, until the aid community are able and willing to step in. To respond otherwise leaves these families in the heart of a military operation with no assistance. This is a result which can easily be argued to be unacceptable on a humanitarian level, and certainly is dramatically counter-productive in a “hearts and minds” campaign.

Despite pronouncements and promises about hearts and minds, the offensive illustrates that the current paradigm for tackling security crises is still **over-reliant on the deployment of military force**. Development, aid, and counter-narcotics issues are not accorded the same level of political and financial support and effort as military endeavours, which creates a situation where those military endeavours are viewed with serious hostility by the local population whose support we seek and need. **67% of the Afghans interviewed by ICOS believe that the military operation was “bad for the Afghan people”.**

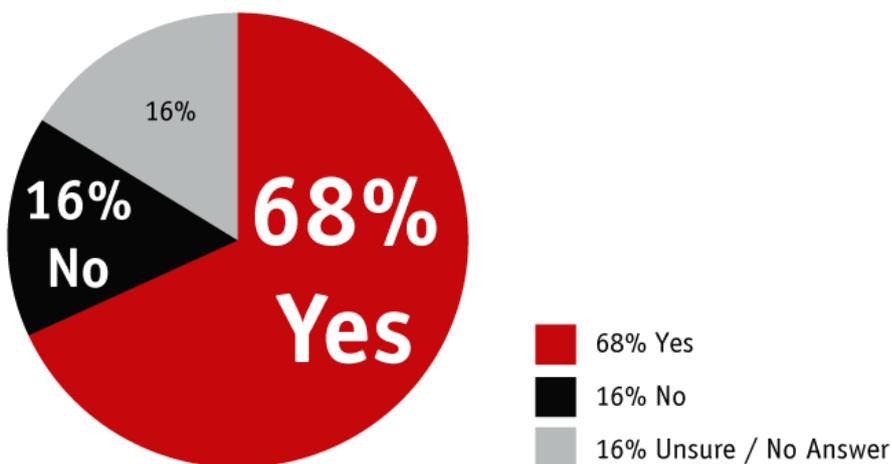
¹⁰ ICRC Press Release, March 5 2010.

Was the military operation in Marjah good or bad for the Afghan people?



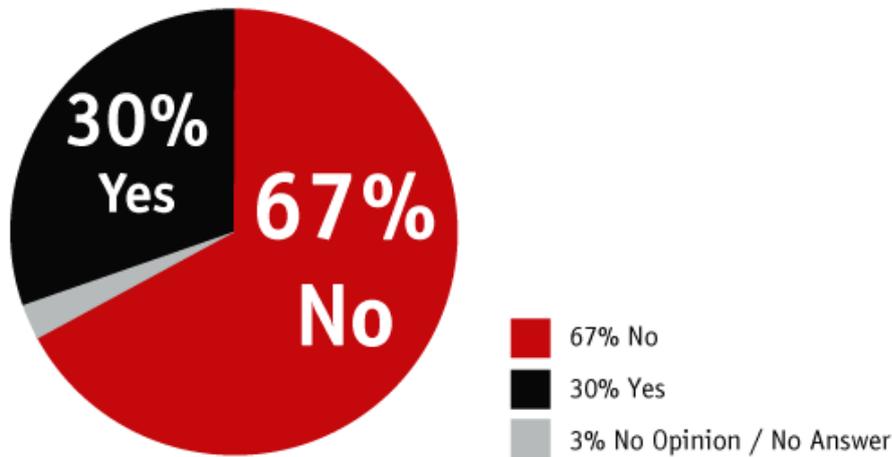
Additionally, we see from the interviews a belief that the Taliban will be able to return to Marjah, a view supported by 59% of Afghans interviewed.

Do you think that the Taliban will return to Marjah and Nad Ali after Operation Moshtarak?

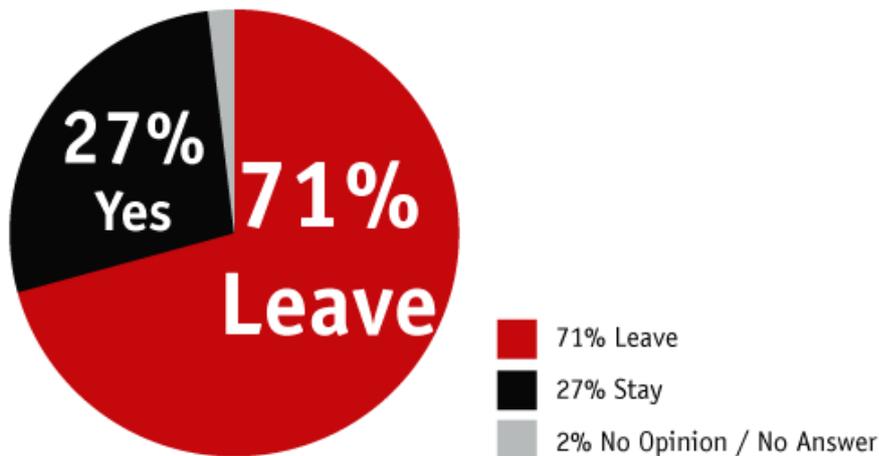


This has, in turn, seriously damaged NATO's reputation in the south of the country. **67% of the Afghans interviewed opposed a strong NATO presence in their province, and 71% say that foreign forces should leave Afghanistan entirely.**

Do you support a strong presence of NATO-ISAF forces in your province?

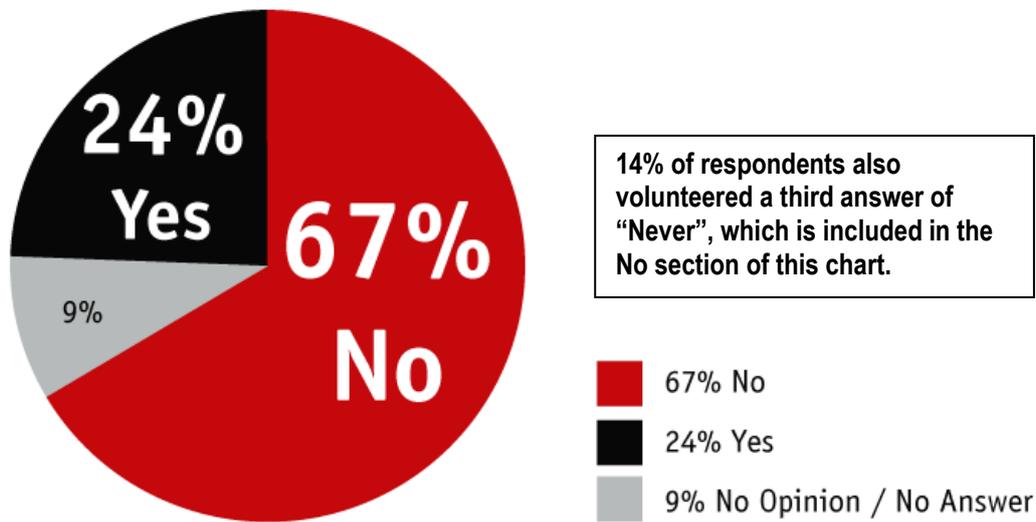


Should NATO troops leave Afghanistan or stay?



Lack of substantial progress in the fight against the Taliban is also reflected by the fact that 67% of Afghans interviewed doubted that NATO could ultimately prevail over the insurgency. 14% of respondents were unequivocal in their conviction that the international community and volunteered the Afghan government would “never” succeed.

In general, do you think NATO and the Afghan government will win against the Taliban?

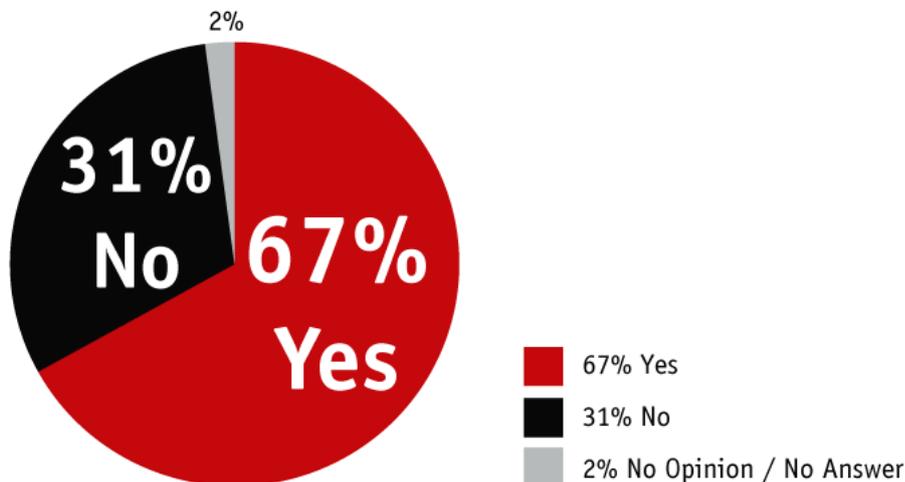


Agreement on Ends, no agreement on the Means

At the same time, 67% of interviewed Afghans say that international and government forces should conduct a military operation against insurgents in Kandahar. This may come as a surprise, given the overall negative assessment of the impact of the Operation Moshtarak.

Yet the underlying positive message is the desire of the Afghans to be rid of the Taliban's presence and violence: what they do not want, however, is to bear the type of unmitigated impact of the fighting between the insurgents and NATO forces that they and their families are experiencing.

Should the international and government forces now "clean the road from Lashkar Gah to Kandahar to Kabul" and start a similar operation in Kandahar or other regions?



An alternative potential target for NATO operations would be the highway between Lashkar Gah and Kandahar, which is often not passable due to Taliban activity. Clearing this vital strategic artery would have immediate benefits for counter-insurgency efforts in the south and east of Afghanistan. It would also allow Afghan citizens to travel and conduct business more easily, improving their sense of security and freedom. Afghans interviewed are strongly supportive of this goal.

“They must clear the road, this is the first thing. In the past, we could use the road and there were no problems but now we cannot go one kilometre without any security.”

Said, journalist

The approval of many Afghans for operations along the road and in Kandahar emphasises their general agreement with the ends, but not the means, of NATO actions. Conducting these operations will be supported by the Afghan people, but only if they are carried out with sensitivity for civilian life and the needs of Afghans.

Poppy Eradication: Fuel to the fire

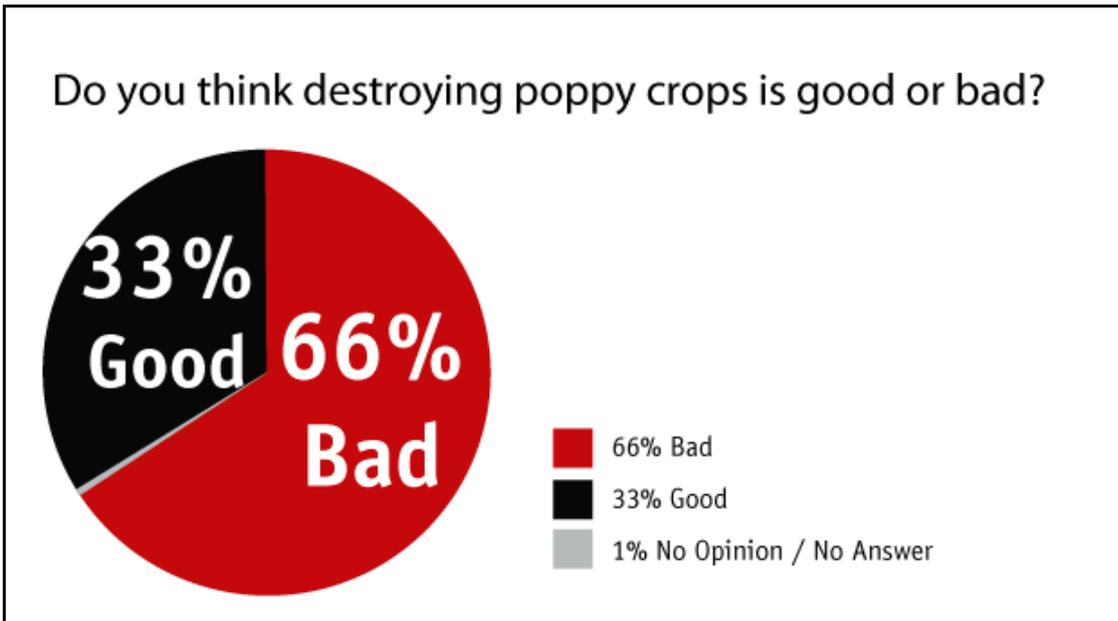
Tackling the district’s opium trade was one of the key reasons for selecting Marjah as a target for this operation. As a result, poppy farmers in and around the area of Marjah were been targeted during and after Operation Moshtarak with poppy crop eradication campaigns. This is remarkable, as the United States policy last year moved away from support for crop eradication. Richard Holbrooke, Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, confirmed that this policy had sent poppy farmers straight into the arms of the Taliban. As such, counter-narcotics interventions focusing on crop eradication work counter-productively and seriously complicate the military’s counter-insurgency campaign.

In the run-up to Operation Moshtarak, Marjah was dubbed the thriving “opium capital” of Helmand province. It is true that opium stockpiles, packaging workshops and makeshift processing plants were found in this area. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) identifies the district of Nad Ali as one of the major opium poppy cultivation centres, but at the same time includes it among twelve districts of Helmand where cultivation is high¹¹. As such, in Helmand, which currently cultivates 57% of all poppies in Afghanistan and produces 59% of all its opium, the district of Nad Ali cannot be singled out as the main opium district¹².

The reality remains that poppy farming is still an integral part of the region’s economy, and eradication is strongly opposed by local Afghans. Therefore, a sound counter-insurgency campaign should not include negative counter-narcotics instruments which create a negative impact in local communities. This risks further eroding their crucial support for the international presence of military troops and their activities on the ground.

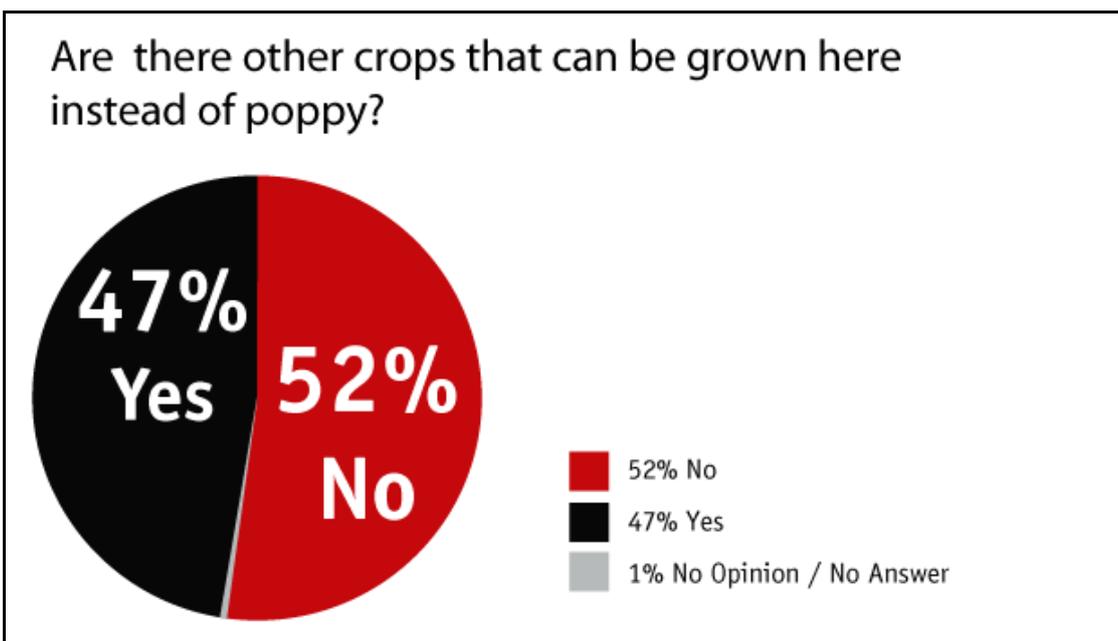
¹¹ UNODC, Afghanistan. Opium Winter Assessment (January 2009), p. 36.

¹² UNODC, Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009 (December 2009), pp. 29, 30.



Growing Discontent over Poppy Eradication

Although there are strong links between the Taliban insurgency and the illegal opium economy, counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics policies should not be mixed in a way that disengages the Afghan population further from the Afghan government and the international community. However, this has happened as a result of Operation Moshtarak and subsequent poppy crop eradications. For instance, local reports indicate that farmers resisting the eradication of their poppies in Baba Ali killed six Afghan police officers. In addition, poppy farmers that fled the fighting in Marjah have returned home to find their poppy fields destroyed just weeks before the harvest (starting around early May), leaving them without a livelihood and unable to feed their families.



Bringing security to Marjah does not, unfortunately, immediately give the impoverished poppy farmers a real choice between the illegal opium economy and legal alternatives. The latter are still not available, despite the international community's million-dollar rural development and alternative livelihood policies. More than half of all Afghans interviewed by ICOS state that no other crops can even be grown in Marjah.

The failure of compensation policies

There have been recent reports about US Marines starting to pay Afghan poppy farmers to destroy their poppy crops voluntarily.¹³ While, at first glance such a counter-narcotics policy looks attractive, it has serious shortcomings. Most importantly, compensating farmers for not growing opium or for destroying their crops does not create an incentive for farmers to switch immediately to other crops.

While these schemes normally include the provision of fertilisers and seeds for alternative crops, poppy farmers have in the past shown a tendency to perceive such schemes as an easy way to make money by continuing to grow poppies the year after. As such, a compensation scheme might work for one growing season, but after that the scheme needs to be continued for several years as sustainable alternative crops are still not available in the short to medium term. The other major problem is that compensation schemes provide a strong incentive for non-poppy growing farmers to enter the business as an easy way to get money and agricultural inputs.

Poppy for Medicine: A Counter-Narcotics, Counter-insurgency, and Economic Development Tool

There is a positive way to bring together counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency policy in Marjah without increasing anger or disillusionment amongst the region's poppy farmers. This can be done by implementing a *Poppy for Medicine* project, which would provide licenses to selected farmers to grow poppies for the local production of essential medicines such as morphine under a tightly controlled system.¹⁴

Poppy for Medicine is an alternative counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency strategy that has been successfully implemented in countries such as India and Turkey, with the support of the United States. While boosting the rural economy and diversifying it over time, *Poppy for Medicine* also integrates farmers and their entire communities into the legal economy, thus driving a wedge between these farming communities and the Taliban insurgency that currently benefits substantially from the illicit opium economy.

Counter-insurgency through Grassroots Economic Development to Win Hearts and Minds

Locally owned and operated, *Poppy for Medicine* village-based poppy control models would have beneficial ink-blot effects on security and economic development in the regions around the villages, and thus complement the international community's mission in Afghanistan. As an economic development-orientated counter-narcotics initiative, *Poppy for Medicine* projects would impact significantly on the international community's efforts to counter the insurgency.

Field research has revealed that the vast majority of Afghan insurgents are driven primarily by economic incentives. These insurgents join the insurgency because they have no jobs and no ways to feed their families. By triggering economic development in rural communities and integrating these communities within the Afghan legal economy and government system, the *Poppy for Medicine* projects would decrease insurgents' recruitment bases.

ICOS is currently calling for a scientific *Poppy for Medicine* pilot project in a few selected areas to see how such a project model could effectively boost rural development. It has been investigating the *Poppy for Medicine* model on the ground since 2005 and has come up with a detailed blueprint with concrete implementation protocols.

¹³ 'Marines pay Afghan farmers to destroy opium', *Reuters* 15 April 2010. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE63E1BL20100415>

¹⁴ For more information about the *Poppy for Medicine* project, visit <http://www.poppyformedicine.net>.

C. Grassroots Political Dynamics

Addressing People's Needs is Critical to Stabilising Marjah

The declaration in advance of the Marjah operation that there was a “government in a box, ready to roll in” shows that NATO and the international community have in principle learnt a lesson from previous years. They have acknowledged that there is a need to focus on **perceptions**. Firstly, they must focus on the perceptions of their domestic political audiences, who need valid reasons – and demonstrations of success – for supporting the war in Afghanistan and the presence of NATO forces in their community. Providing tangible, visible benefits of the international military presence is a necessary element in sustaining domestic support.

Secondly, the international community have emphasised publicly that military operations should be designed to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. This is an overdue shift from a security policy focused on military indicators of ‘progress’, such as the number of dead Taliban. Military action that is not followed by an effective action plan for aid, reconstruction and political engagement with the local population will only serve to inflame tensions – and therefore provide the Taliban insurgency with a new pool of potential recruits.

Marjah is a clear opportunity to test the commitment of NATO and the Afghan government. The district’s new government must be fully resourced, supported by the West, and competent. Social and economic structures must also be seen as Non-Violent Security Instruments and integrated into NATO’s short-, medium-, and long-term planning for the region. This would help Marjah’s young men to acquire a sense of “enfranchisement”, undo the resentment created by NATO’s attack on the district, address their legitimate grievances and deter them from being recruited by Taliban insurgents. A new equation for counter-insurgency operations is needed which addresses the suffering, civilian casualties, and other negative impacts created by military action.

A new “COIN Impact Equation”:

***Balance Negative Impact with Positive Impact:
Positive Impact must be Greater than Negative Impact***

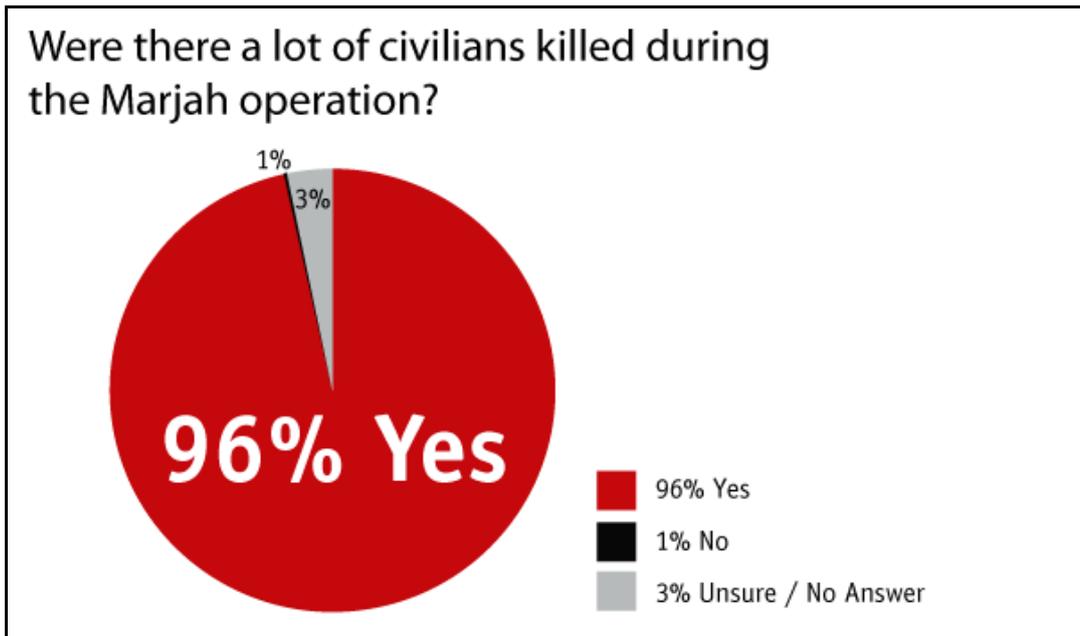
It is clear that even the most meticulous military planning and sensitively conducted combat operations cannot exclude the possibility of civilian suffering. During the course of future operations against the Taliban, the military needs a much more robust contingency plan to respond to inevitable instances civilian casualties, displacement, or destruction of property.

To meet the above equation, this negative impact must be countered by positive impact, which must be greater than the negative impact. Measures such as financial compensation help with reconstruction and trust-building campaigns among the afflicted communities must be implemented immediately.

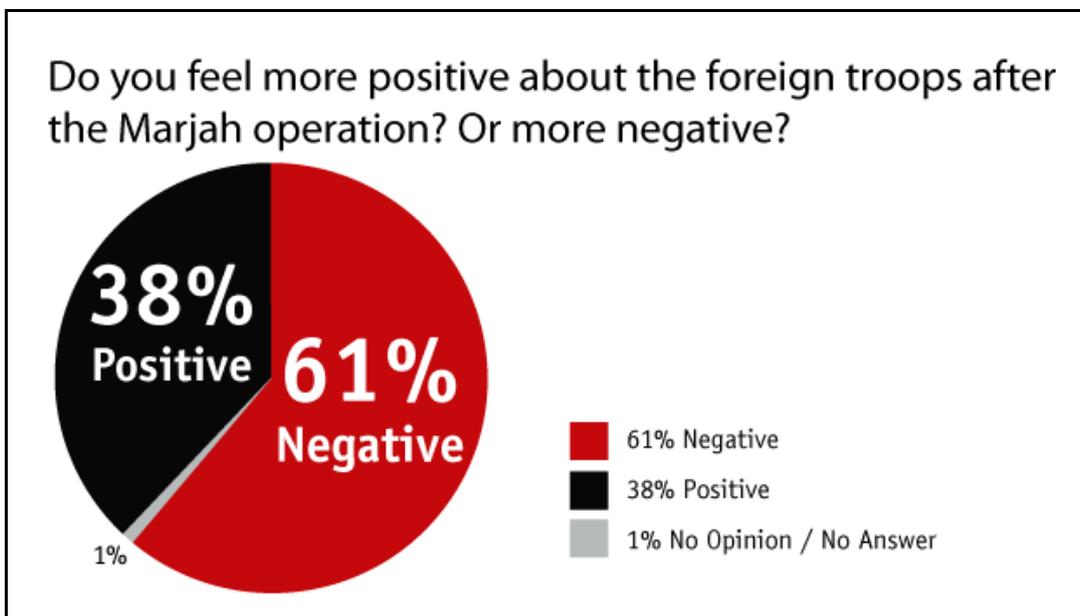
Resentment over civilian casualties

The most damaging negative impact of the military operation comes from the displacement of local populations, civilian casualties and night raids. The great majority of Afghans questioned believe that many civilians have been killed during the Marjah operation, with estimates of more than 200. These estimates reflect a sharp rise from the figures attested by aid agencies and human rights groups.¹⁵ The number of civilian deaths is equivalent to between a quarter and a half of all insurgent deaths, a discouraging ratio for a “hearts and minds” operation.

¹⁵ The Afghan Red Crescent Society estimated on March 16 that 35 civilians had been killed and 37 injured.



Operation Moshtarak not only failed to win the hearts and minds of the people of Marjah, but it has actually driven them further away from the international community. The offensive has provoked anger, disillusionment, and even more hostility. 61% of those interviewed by ICOS stated that the operation has made them feel **more negative about the presence and activities of foreign forces**.



Lack of contingency plans for civilian suffering

So far, there is no clear evidence that the international community has instituted a comprehensive, politically effective system of providing compensation to all those who lost relatives or property in the assault.

“The international community must pay a fine for this because of what they have done; they must compensate these people for the damage done by the fighting.”

Mohammad Nasim Aka, unemployed

To regain its lost credibility amongst the Afghan people, the West should generate positive outcomes by engaging in a series of symbolic political and cultural acts (see box below) to restore trust and counteract Taliban propaganda before, during and after the Kandahar operation.

Grassroots Engagement with Local Communities – A Potent “Hearts and Minds” Tool

Restoring Mosques and Shrines

As part of the initiatives aimed at grassroots engagement and, when necessary, forgiveness for civilian displacement and casualties, an intensive programme to repair and renovate major mosques and shrines across southern Afghanistan should be undertaken.

This can be undertaken as part of a “request for forgiveness” for the civilian casualties, destruction of property, displacement and night raids that are at the heart of much of the resentment against the NATO presence in the south. This would also work to counteract the Taliban’s propaganda, which portrays Westerners as anti-Muslim and seeking to destroy Afghanistan’s cultural and religious heritage.

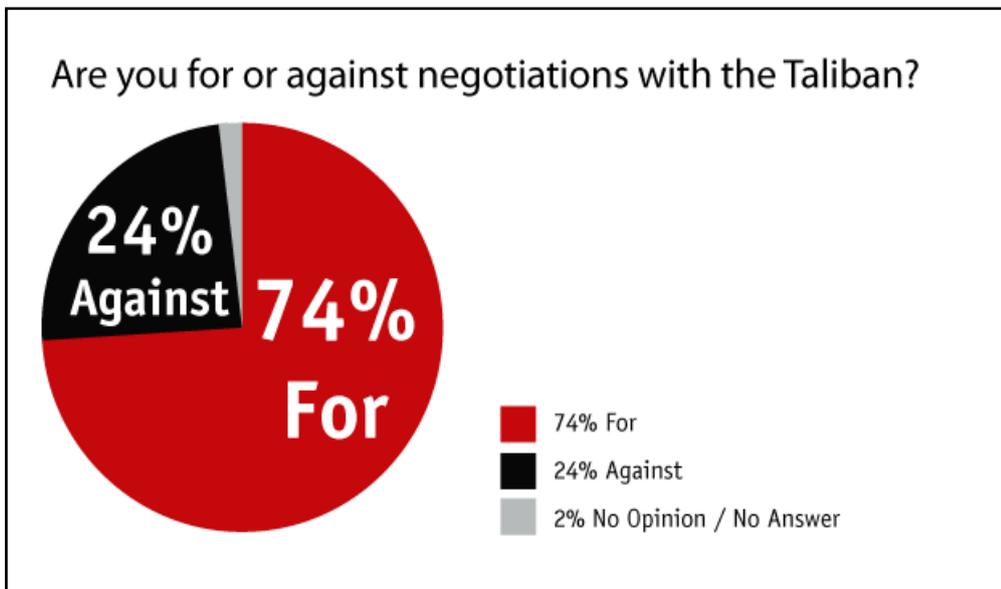
Quran Distribution Programme

An equally effective measure of showing respect for and support of the local culture and religion would be a Holy Quran distribution programme. Possession of a copy of the Holy Quran is highly valued among rural Afghans yet unattainable to many because of widespread poverty. Distributing copies of the Quran, perhaps with the help of local religious leaders, would directly counter the Taliban propaganda that accuses NATO of pursuing an anti-Islamic, “crusader” agenda.

Other methods of connecting and engaging with the Afghan people at the grassroots level would include the provision of land and marriage allowances, referred to above. These would allow ordinary Afghans a tangible stake in their country’s future. Supporting such initiatives would be a major step towards restoring the international community’s credibility in the eyes of Afghans.

On a broader level, it is clear that military action alone is unable to bring peace in Afghanistan. To build a lasting political settlement, reaching out to insurgents is essential.¹⁶ The Afghans interviewed strongly support a process of dialogue with the Taliban, with 74% approving of negotiations.

¹⁶ Dorransoro, G (2010) *Afghanistan – Searching for Political Agreement*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/searching_polit_agreement.pdf



Conclusions: Operation Moshtarak causes Afghan Hearts and Minds to slip further away

The lack of attention to the welfare, lives and property of civilian communities during Operation Moshtarak has had severe and negative consequences in the battle to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. Operation Moshtarak and the devastation to the local community that it has brought about have generated high levels of resentment of the international presence in Afghanistan, and have provided a perfect recruiting tool for the Taliban.¹⁷

Despite indications - such as the idea of a “government in a box” - that the international community and NATO have recognised the need to prioritise the Afghan people, much more attention should have been paid to the balance between Marjah’s social, political, economic, and security imperatives.

The international community must view stability, throughout Afghanistan, as a ‘security eco-system’, requiring a comprehensive framework of investment strategies, developmental efforts, governance reforms, and limited military operations. The prospects for future generations of Afghans can only be achieved through this long-term, comprehensive approach.

Operation Moshtarak raises many unanswered questions about the future conduct of the Afghan war. The choice of Marjah as a target has served political, not military objectives, demonstrating an easy ‘victory’ in order to boost support for the war among domestic political constituencies. However the lack of preparation and forward planning means that, ironically, Operation Moshtarak now serves as a lesson in the international community’s failures in Afghanistan.

In the upcoming months Marjah must not be ignored or marginalised: the blow-back from the flaws in Operation Moshtarak must be addressed, and the international community must redouble its efforts to provide security and development to the Afghan people there.

Learning lessons from Marjah is also critical for the upcoming operation in Kandahar. Urgent steps must be taken to reverse failing policies and prevent a repeat of the negative impacts of Operation Moshtarak. In

¹⁷ Ruttig, T (2009) *The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to ‘Talks’*. Afghanistan Analysts Network. Available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/200907%20AAN%20Report%20Ruttig%20-%20The%20Other%20Side.PDF>

particular, NATO and international community must engage with grassroots communities in Kandahar with a series of “Dramatic Positive Local Actions” to reshape relationships with this hyper-politicized community.

Timing is critical: this must be undertaken before, during, and after operations in Kandahar to build lasting and sustainable support among the Afghan people.

ICOS Recommendations: *Full-Spectrum Advanced Civilian Planning Process*

Short and long-term initiatives which provide social and economic assistance to the people of Marjah and Kandahar should be urgently deployed. These initiatives should constitute a Full-Spectrum (covering military, aid, developmental, and political aspects) Advanced Civilian Planning Process, which would tackle the roots of the insurgency and deliver real benefits for the Afghan people.

A. Interfering with Taliban Recruitment

- **Marriage Allowance Scheme.** A marriage-allowance scheme should be implemented for the young men in Kandahar and elsewhere. Providing financial assistance to cover the high costs of a dowry and a wedding would provide them with a stable family situation and socio-economic responsibilities, reducing the risks of Taliban recruitment.
- **Land Allowances.** Providing poor rural Afghans with parcels of land would give them a strong stake in the future of the country. This would be widely welcomed amongst the landless poor.

B. Refugee Aid and Support

- **Fully-Resourced Aid Initiatives** should be deployed. These should include the deployment of ambulances and field hospitals for the civilian population in the conflict zone to provide flexible and accessible medical treatment.
- **Establishment of “Camps in a Box”.** These should be pre-designed facilities for those displaced by the fighting containing all necessary elements – food, clean water, flexible medical treatment (including ambulances), shelter, and above all security.
- **Active Engagement with Displaced People.** Our research teams in Helmand found that many refugees from Marjah had not been actively sought out by Afghan or international representatives. Refugees should be actively encouraged to move into purpose-built camps, which must be highly publicised. Moreover, the displaced people of Marjah must be supported in returning to their homes. This should involve logistical assistance (including transportation) and financial aid and compensation.
- **Provision of Food Aid Surge and other Emergency Relief.** The citizens of Marjah and Kandahar – including the displaced people - must be provided with essential supplies to secure their basic humanitarian needs.
- **Integration of Local Aid Agencies into Humanitarian Efforts.** Relief organisations should be fully resourced and financially supported by NATO forces and the international community.
- **Military Delivery of Aid.** In areas in which relief agencies are unable or unwilling to operate due to security issues, NATO should support and implement development and aid projects in areas.
- **Poppy for Medicine Pilot Project.** *Poppy for Medicine* pilot projects should be implemented in southern Afghanistan before the upcoming growing season (starting in October- November 2010). Farmers should be sold licences to grow opium poppies which would be processed into morphine in local facilities and sold to the central government in Kabul, supported by the international community.

C. Positively Influencing Grassroots Political Dynamics

- **Dramatic Positive Local Actions.** These should demonstrate NATO's commitment to the well-being of local communities. A response to civilian suffering should include public statements of apology and regret for the civilian casualties of NATO operations, but this should only be one element in a larger strategy aimed at reshaping the relationship at the grassroots level in advance of the military operations.
- **Counter Perceptions of Anti-Islamic Activities.** Operation Moshtarak and the international operations in Afghanistan generally, are often portrayed in Taliban propaganda as "a War against Islam". Countering this perception is vital to winning hearts and minds. Implementing a programme to **restore local mosques and religious facilities**, to demonstrate that the international community respects the religion and culture of the Afghan people. A Quran distribution programme could be a companion piece to this initiative.

Timing is everything: These or similar programmes, must be undertaken in advance of the offensive in Kandahar, and maintained at a high level before, during, and after the military operations.

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