

The High Stakes Battle for the Future of Musa Qala

By David C. Isby

SINCE ITS REOCCUPATION by NATO and Afghan forces in December 2007, the remote Musa Qala district of northern Helmand Province in Afghanistan has become important to the future course of the insurgency but also to the future of a Pashtun tribe (the Alizai), a republic (the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) and even a kingdom (the United Kingdom). The changes that take place at Musa Qala will influence the future of all of them. Failure has the potential to be a harbinger of potential ultimate failure for the Alizais, Kabul and London alike; each needs to succeed at Musa Qala.

The Alizai Heartland

The importance of Musa Qala to the Alizai is not surprising. It is their tribal heartland. In southern Afghanistan, local politics are tribal politics. In the 1970s—the last time such data could be collected—the Musa Qala district had approximately 30,000 people in around 70 villages, 93% of them Alizais from all six of the major clans, Khalozai (Khan Khel), Habibzai, Hasanzai, Shekhzai, Pirzai and Adozai.¹ The Alizai themselves are a sub-tribe of the Noorzai, one of the Panjpai (“five brothers”) tribes that makes up part of the Durrani Pashtuns.

While firmly part of the tribal politics of southern Afghanistan, those of Musa Qala differed from those in Kandahar Province or even elsewhere in Helmand Province. Musa Qala is dominated by a single tribal identity, differing from most other districts in the region, including those in southern Helmand. While Kandahar Province tends to be dominated by a relatively few large landowners, Musa Qala has traditionally had many smaller landowners, making use of the extensive irrigation from the Musa Qala river. In the 1970s, the district had approximately 2,300 landlords each with an average of 17 acres of cultivated land, with 60 canals irrigating more than a quarter of the

district. This created the standard of small landlords farming small, well-irrigated holdings. While tribal structure, economy and population alike have been badly damaged by decades of warfare, Musa Qala has a situation that is more likely to yield internal stability by building on what is left of traditional Afghanistan.

Before the well-publicized October 2006 “truce” that Alizai leaders concluded with the Taliban, Musa Qala had experienced a broad range of approaches to countering the insurgency. In addition to their dissatisfaction with British operations in 2006, local inhabitants claimed that Kabul had not supported them, shown by previous Afghan National Army (ANA) units operating in their area before that had been commanded by Dari-speaking officers who often made a point of pretending not to speak Pashtu, and with Dari-speaking soldiers who really did not know any other language, plus an Afghan National Police (ANP) presence that was active only in extracting resources from the population. Militias loyal to then-Helmand Governor Sher Mohammed Akhundzada also had poor relations with the Alizai jirga and much of the local population. This force became less effective after their patron lost power in 2006, leaving the British to inherit a security vacuum that had been filled by the Taliban. Only the local *arbaki* (tribal militia), with personally owned weapons, was regarded well.² The *arbaki* had helped turn back the initial Taliban attempt to establish a presence in 2004.

By December 2006, relations between the Taliban and Alizai leaders had soured.³ The Taliban, according to Afghan press reports, were not Alizai but were mostly foreign nationals who fled to Baghran district when Musa Qala was reoccupied.⁴ The Taliban have made sure that the local inhabitants of Musa Qala are aware that, while pre-2001 they reserved their more repressive policies for Dari-speaking urban populations

and treated their presumed supporters in the south better,⁵ this time there would be no mercy shown to “collaborators.” This included executing, along with alleged criminals, several “spies,” which included Afghans who had taken part in work-for-food programs.⁶

The Alizai are also hoping to get more from the new security situation. They have requested that Kabul make Musa Qala a separate province.⁷ This proposal has been supported by current and former Helmand provincial governors. This would provide opportunities for patronage and give them a legally-recognized base that competing tribal groups in the south would be unlikely to match.

Kabul's Challenge

Kabul's challenge is to prove that its policies are relevant to the future of Musa Qala and its people in a way it was unable to do in 2001-2006. For example, according to one press report, after recapturing Musa Qala the government announced that more than \$60 million would be spent on “reconstruction and welfare services in the provinces in an effort to encourage the people to stop supporting the Taleban and cultivating poppy.”⁸ Other press reports provided details: “a contract has been signed with private companies to build two schools and a religious school...at a cost of 6,394,700 dollars. Canada will provide the funds.”⁹ The press reports have not, however, identified whether a funding stream has been identified to operate these schools and the degree of local involvement with this development; both have frequently been absent from such efforts in the south.

Both reconstruction and recreating security in Musa Qala will be difficult.

5 For more information on the Taliban's weak enforcement of haircuts and schools in Musa Qala from 2006-07, see Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, pp. 72, 104.

6 Personal interview, Afghan source, 2008. See also “Taleban Hang Afghan Teenager for ‘Spying,’” *Pajhwok Afghan News*, January 18, 2008.

7 “Musa Qala Should Be Upgraded to Province,” *Hasht-e Sabb* [Kabul], February 17, 2008.

8 Mohammad Amin Mirzad, “The Taleban Still Rule Helmand Province,” *The Daily Afghanistan* [Kabul], January 26, 2008, p. 4.

9 Larghunpal, “Candle of Education is Relit in Musa Qala,” *Hewad* [Kabul], February 6, 2008.

1 Pre-war information is drawn from Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical and Political Gazetteer of Afghanistan, Kandahar and South-Central Afghanistan* 5 (1980).

2 This information was drawn from a source that was in Helmand Province during this period.

3 Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 50, 211.

4 “Terrorist Bases Should Be Eliminated,” *Anis* [Kabul], January 12, 2008.

The Musa Qala Taliban were not destroyed in battle, but moved largely to adjacent districts in 2007. Helmand member of parliament Nasima Niazi has claimed that the Taliban remain active in Musa Qala despite the reoccupation.¹⁰ Security outside the district center remains uncertain.

By strengthening the Alizai connection with a district chief with tribal legitimacy who can point out that the Taliban are largely foreigners, Kabul may be looking to get the population of Musa Qala to resist or at least limit cooperation with the largely cross-border insurgency and narcotics. Currently, while Musa Qala is growing a significant poppy crop, Kabul is not aiming to eradicate it (unlike in Greshk, Nawa, Marja and Nade-e Ali districts and the capital Lashkar Gah in Helmand Province).¹¹ This reflects Kabul's concerns that an eradication campaign would undercut the counter-insurgency effort.

The most obvious change is the appointment of Mullah Abdul Salaam, an Alizai of the Pirzai clan, as district chief. He was the former Taliban district chief of Kajaki and acting governor of neighboring Uruzgon Province prior to 2001, the highest-ranking former Taliban official serving under the current government. Abdul Salaam has been allowed to keep his own personal militia of some 300 men, who function as successors to the *arbaki*. This sets an important example to those opposing Kabul that they can be reintegrated into Afghanistan's political process. To the insurgents, he is a major target. Current Taliban propaganda stresses the use of fear to dissuade cooperation with Kabul and its coalition allies,¹² and if Abdul Salaam can cooperate so overtly and survive or even thrive, this will look less persuasive. He was the target of cross-border suicide bombers in January and gunmen in February.¹³

¹⁰ Ehsanollah Daulat Moradi, "Karzai's Confrontation with Britain over Administration of Helmand," *Hasbt-e Sobh*, January 27, 2008.

¹¹ Dad Nurani, "How Drugs Will be Dealt With in Helmand Province," *Arman-e Melli* [Kabul], February 27, 2008.

¹² On Taliban themes, see Thomas H. Johnson, "The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters)," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18:2 (2007).

¹³ Ron Synovitz, "Afghanistan: Ex-Taliban Commander Lectures Mullah Omar About Koran," RFE/RL, Febru-

ary 1, 2008. Report on National TV Afghanistan, February 13, 2008.

Abdul Salaam is a charismatic and controversial figure. He is using his tribal and religious connections to talk with authority figures to help consolidate the government position in Musa Qala. Abdul Salaam's major theme is to portray the Taliban as outsiders, reflecting that many of them are either foreigners or Afghans from other areas and tribes. Western press reports have criticized him extensively. To British Lieutenant-Colonel Ed Freely, "He appears less interested in governing his people than reinforcing his own personal position of power."¹⁴ To the Kabul-appointed chief of police of Helmand Province, Brigadier Mohammad Hussain Andiwai, he is a "war criminal" involved in the slaughter of prisoners and a "leading heroin producer."¹⁵

Great British Setbacks

The military operations in Musa Qala since the reoccupation have been carried out by a broad range of Afghan and coalition military forces. U.S. Marines have been playing a major role in recent operations in Helmand Province. Yet, Helmand remains a British area of operations, and the role of Musa Qala in the 2006 fighting—plus their withdrawal and the subsequent truce with the Taliban—make success in 2008 an important objective.

The British 2006 campaign in southern Afghanistan has already become part of military history—marked by a popular 2007 exhibition at the National Army Museum in London—but the results of that fighting have not helped the United Kingdom's image as NATO's foremost practitioner of counter-insurgency and stability operations, employing tactics refined since Malaya in conflicts worldwide. Rather, the image was of besieged "platoon house" outposts under Taliban attack and of too few deployed forces being desperately under-resourced.¹⁶ British forces in Afghanistan lack an ability to fund

¹⁴ Jerome Starkey, "Former Warlord Blames UK for Breakdown in Security," *Independent*, June 9, 2008.

¹⁵ Stephen Grey, "Understanding the Taliban," *New Statesman*, April 24, 2008.

¹⁶ Extensive UK press coverage included Tim Albone, "Pathfinders on a Four-Day Mission Fight off Eight-Week Taleban Siege," *The Times*, September 27, 2006. This article was critical of the ANP role.

quick response development programs in a way comparable to the United States,¹⁷ and, according to the *Economist*, "a growing number of British officers grudgingly recognize that America is learning the lessons of irregular warfare, drawn mainly from British colonial experience, better than the modern British Army."¹⁸

Since the initial withdrawal from Musa Qala in 2006, the British image for military capability in general and counter-insurgency competence in particular has suffered a number of setbacks, by no means all in Afghanistan. The success of Iraqi forces in Basra in 2008 was widely seen as them doing a job that the British had left unfinished for political reasons. Britain's relations

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with Kabul have suffered a number of setbacks, from the removal of diplomats following direct negotiations (bypassing Kabul) with the Taliban at Musa Qala in 2006 to Kabul's rejection of Lord Paddy Ashdown to be the new UN envoy in Afghanistan.¹⁹ British differences with the government in Kabul have increased, and Britain has become the focus of much of the frustration with coalition efforts.²⁰

A success in Musa Qala will have the potential to assure Kabul that Britain can still deliver results and that Helmand Province will not end up like Basra. It will also demonstrate that the United Kingdom can still produce

¹⁷ "A War of Money as Well as Bullets," *Economist*, May 22, 2008.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, pp. 211-12, suggests that the United States and Kabul took action to end the British-engineered truce.

²⁰ Examples include "Coldness in Relations - Everything Started as a Result of Musa Qala," *The Daily Afghanistan*, January 28, 2008; "Lack of Coordination in the War on Terror will Result in Failure," *The Daily Afghanistan*, February 2, 2008; "Kandahar Awaits Helmand's Fate?" *Rab-e Nejat* [Kabul], February 21, 2008; "Prince Harry Returns to London," *The Kabul Times*, March 3, 2008.

military successes despite a lack of resources. Otherwise, it will reinforce the perception that all the United Kingdom is capable of is to “scale back reconstruction objectives in order to end the fighting, declare victory, and leave.”²¹

The Future

Alizais, Kabul and London alike have a lot more at stake in Musa Qala than simply influencing the future of a remote town and its surrounding district. Each is looking at a potentially best possible case to show that they can make a positive contribution to Afghanistan’s future. If any of them fail, it raises the question, where can they succeed?

For the Alizais, the current situation is a chance to do things again their way under a fusion of tribal and federal government (rather than tribal and Taliban) leadership. If the Alizais in Musa Qala, who have the advantage of a cohesive population, defensible territory, and a leader appointed by Kabul to rally the population cannot succeed, then it is questionable which of the tribes that populate southern Afghanistan will be successful in countering the insurgency. The loyalty of the Alizai may be a significant indicator of the overall situation in the south. The tribe still reveres the memory of Aktur Khan, an Alizai who led the uprising against Shah Sujha, though a Durrani, in 1840, after he appeared to be too close to the British. Abdul Salaam is already on record saying that he is contending with large unmet desires by his tribal supporters and that neither the provincial government, Kabul nor Britain—due to tribal rivalry, lack of resources, corruption or distrust—are meeting these needs, hurting his claim to legitimacy.²²

For Kabul, it is an opportunity to show that it is relevant in creating a better future for all of the country, even those areas where the Taliban and narcotics are most entrenched. Unless Kabul can show that it will not once again be subjected to a deal made without its participation that allows the Taliban back, many in the area will be reluctant to support the government. The role of former Taliban in Musa Qala will have importance as a

model for Afghanistan as a whole; it will certainly be watched by Hamid Karzai’s critics in Kabul and from the Northern Alliance that are concerned Karzai has been appeasing the Taliban and aiming to secure Pashtun loyalty. It also could suggest a greater role for local leaders in Kabul’s appointment of district chiefs in the future, a change from the current insistence on centralization. Previous unmet aid commitments in Musa Qala have made the local inhabitants distrustful.²³

For the United Kingdom, it is a chance to show that the second largest coalition member in terms of troops in Afghanistan can demonstrate results on the ground commensurate with their status in bilateral and multilateral security relationships. As British policy is to channel aid through Kabul where feasible, this provides an opportunity for aid to be directed in Musa Qala in order to show a long-term commitment at preventing the Taliban from returning to burn schools and kill Afghans. If the United Kingdom fails in Musa Qala, its relations with coalition partners and Afghans alike is likely to be harmed, and it may have a further impact on its international standing.

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²¹ Richard Weitz, “NATO Allies Experience Battle Fatigue,” www.eurasianet.org, May 19, 2008.

²² Grey, *Understanding the Taliban*.

²³ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, p. 197