

Marjah – 1 year on



Abdul Mutalib Majbor, the District Governor of Marjah, shakes hands with a local business owner at the Izmat Bazaar in Marjah, January 2011.

“The real sign of progress is to see these young children out here whose parents trust the environment enough to let their children run free, to see an Afghan army soldier standing by my side who is helping us provide security, seeing the policeman up and down the street doing what policemen do, protect and serve and to see the shops open.” Maj Gen Mills – Today Show, 20 Nov 2010

Background

In early 2010, Marjah, then a town in the Nad Ali district of Helmand province, was an area completely controlled by insurgents. It was a centre for bomb-making and narcotics production which had also been fuelling the insurgency in other regions. The Taliban flag had flown over the town for several years. The estimated 80,000 residents who live in Marjah and surrounding villages were in many respects held hostage by the insurgents, their government unable to provide any security or services.

Afghan and NATO forces launched Operation Moshtarak – meaning ‘Together’ in Dari – which was aimed at removing the insurgents and re-establishing government control in the Helmand River Valley area. As part of Operation Moshtarak, security operations began in Marjah on 13 February 2010, with a dramatic night-time helicopter assault, representing the first major Afghan-led counter-insurgency operation since the start of President Karzai’s second term.

One year on, there has been real progress in Marjah. Today, Marjah, now a distinct district, has a governor, schools, health clinics and half a dozen markets that continue to grow. Afghan police patrol the streets and residents now feel safe enough to travel to the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, where they can benefit from other government services including agricultural support for licit crops. Marjah is a perfect example of implementation of our comprehensive civil-military approach. It is both solidifying the security gains that have been achieved over the last months, and capitalising on them by helping Afghans and international stakeholders develop governance, carry out reconstruction activities, initiate economic projects and continue expanding security.

Security Gains

Since the launch of Operation Moshtarak in Marjah in February 2010, the Afghan government has been able to establish an Afghan Uniformed Police force in Marjah that has recruited and trained more than 270 police officers. There are four police stations with plans to build an additional one. The Afghan government recently approved Marjah to participate in the Afghan Local Police programme, which will help to support local police. This programme, which mobilises entire communities, will enable the community to defend itself against the Taliban under supervision of local elders.

Since July 2010, there has been an 80 percent reduction in insurgent activity in Marjah. Insurgent intimidation around the 5 main bazaars (Balikino, Loy Chareh, Choor Chareh, Karo Chareh, Kim) has significantly reduced and the bazaars are beginning to thrive. The success of joint operations between Afghan and coalition forces throughout Marjah, and an increased presence of the Afghan government is continually degrading the insurgents’ ability to intimidate the local people.



Bazaar in Marjah, February 2011.

Governance Gains

In February 2010, the Afghan government had only two or three representatives in Marjah. A year later, Marjah has approximately 20 government officials working for the district. The people of Marjah are beginning to work with the Afghan government and the Afghan security forces, as evidenced by local elders stepping forward to engage with government officials and to help coordinate development projects and security efforts within the district. On Election Day, 18 September 2010, despite threats from the insurgency to ‘destroy’ the election process, the district’s leadership and Afghan security forces planned and carried out a successful security plan. Nearly 100 election workers were safely transported by the Afghan National Army and Police to 12 polling sites throughout Marjah. Twelve hundred Marjah residents registered to vote with 935 of them casting their ballots.

Earlier this year the citizens of the town elected leaders within their community to form a District Community Council that will represent their views and concerns to the District Government, which in turn is connected to the Provincial Government and the Afghan Government.

Development Gains

As part of a Counter Narcotics programme, the Afghan Government’s Food Zone Program has supplied 5,500 provincial farmers with fertilizer, wheat and vegetable plant seeds at a government-subsidized price. Ninety-three percent of the farmers in Marjah have now benefited from this program. ISAF continues to report that the planting of illicit crops has diminished considerably with a significant percentage of local farmers in Marjah growing legal crops.

Increased security and improved road infrastructure has cut the travel time between the Marjah District Centre and northern Marjah to 30 minutes from 1 hour 30 minutes just six months ago. In particular, this has given farmers access to markets which were previously inaccessible. Several road improvement projects within Marjah are ongoing which will further provide the population with better access to markets.

The education system in Marjah has seen substantial improvements over the last year, with eight schools now operating, and an increase in the number of enrolled students from 200 to more than 1,000. The number of girls enrolled in the Marjah school system has increased from zero to more than 100. With the reconstruction of Marjah Central High School, which is now 20 to 30 percent complete, Marjah now has the highest student attendance in the district with more than 500 students.

As elsewhere in Afghanistan, healthcare is still an emerging capability. Marjah however now has a comprehensive health clinic, two sub-centres and 25 health posts - something the residents did not have under the violent rule of Taliban.

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