



(Photo by Sgt. Jessi McCormick, 102nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Maj. Timothy Redhair, 56th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, listens as Najibullah Popelzai, Chora District governor, speaks to tribal leaders and members of parliament during a luncheon 24 February 2013 at district headquarters in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan.

# Retaking a District Center

## A Case Study in the Application of Village Stability Operations

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**M**uch of the writing about the Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police (VSO/ALP) Program in Afghanistan is of a theoretical nature. While this body of work sometimes uses a limited number of anecdotes to illustrate key concepts, it often lacks a long-term perspective on one area of the war and rarely integrates security, governance, and development initiatives simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, tribal leaders, factional histories, and a historical perspective are often missing in studies of VSO/ALP, where emphasis is generally placed upon the actions of U.S. units, with Afghan efforts only peripherally discussed.<sup>2</sup>

What is required is a holistic presentation of village stability operations in practice that balances U.S. efforts with Afghan initiatives and integrates all the key lines of operation in a manner that provides a long-term perspective on one district or village in Afghanistan.

The district of Chora in the southern Afghanistan province of Uruzgan provides a unique opportunity to provide such a perspective. I originally worked in Uruzgan with the U.S. Department of State as the political officer to the Tarin Kowt Provincial Reconstruction Team in 2005–2006 and then returned to the province in 2012 as a mobilized reservist working as a tribal and political engagement officer at Special Operations Task Force–South East. These experiences as both a civilian and a member of the U.S. military provided me with a holistic perspective on the area and greatly informed my views on U.S. operations in the region. Additionally, because I served in the province for two lengthy periods of time separated by six years, I gained a long-term perspective of not just Uruzgan Province but of the district of Chora in particular.

## Uruzgan Province: The Heartland of the Taliban

The district of Chora is located just east of Uruzgan Province's capital of Tarin Kowt and sits along the Karmisan River, which flows southwest and eventually feeds into the Helmand River. It is largely made up of barren desert and stark mountains. The population lives along densely packed green swathes of farmland, where local residents eke out a basic existence cultivating the arable land that collects in the river basin and at the bases of the mountains.

The district's approximately 20,000 residents are divided into two sections by a mountain range that bisects the middle of the region from east to west. The whole area is predominately Pashtun and is generally divided into the Barakzai and Achikzai tribes in the northern portion and the Populzai in the south around the village of Chenartu. Hazaran and Baluch ethnic communities are also present, with the Hazaran population in larger numbers in the northern areas closer to the predominantly Hazaran province of Dai Kundi. The district borders Zabul Province to the south and Dai Kundi to the north, and the Uruzgan districts of Khas Uruzgan to the east, Tarin Kowt to the south, and Shahid-e-Hasas to the west.

The Chora area has long served as a transit hub for insurgents from both Helmand and Zabul Provinces. They pour into the districts respectively west and east of Chora and then transit, finally, to the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt. The population is generally anti-Taliban because of their largely Durrani Pashtun tribal affiliation (the Taliban are typically affiliated with the Ghilzai tribal confederation) and are more naturally inclined to support the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA).

## Chora: 2005 to 2006—The Taliban Return

The district of Chora was considered the safest in Uruzgan Province in late 2005. Although it did not have a coalition forces base located in its district center, the active patrolling of 25th Infantry Division units located in Khas Uruzgan District to its east, as well as patrols from the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt, dissuaded the Taliban from establishing a presence in the area. The key tribal chiefs of the Barakzai and Achikzai tribes in the area were substantial leaders in the province, the former being the provincial chief of police and the latter a member of parliament. Although both tribes were influential in their own way, they were largely excluded from the political power of the provincial government, which was dominated by members of the governor's Populzai tribe. The leaders of the Populzai tribe in southern Chora had benefitted greatly from the provincial government's largesse and, although they lived in much poorer circumstances than their district neighbors to the north, had more influence with key leaders in the capital.

The provincial reconstruction team and 25th Infantry Division team made frequent trips to the district center and the village of Chenartu, and through projects such as a new district center, a traffic circle, and smaller scale projects such as wells, the population received some development assistance. However, when the fighting season began in early 2006, this tranquil spot of Uruzgan, whose residents supported GIRoA, was overrun by the Taliban, with the district center falling to Taliban control.

The Taliban's offensive was not a limited operation consisting of a small number of fighters; instead, it was a conventional assault with the goal of holding the area and repulsing any subsequent GIRoA effort to take it back. The departure of the 25th Infantry Division in the summer of 2005, in part due to a perception the province was largely secured, facilitated the resurgence of the Taliban in the area. Gone were the days of limited Taliban attacks on the margins of the province; the province was now effectively split into two halves.

As a result, the insurgents poured into Chora from Uruzgan's western district of Shahid-e-Hasas, which bordered the then insurgent-controlled province of Helmand, and used the cultivated fields of the river basins to mask their movements. While a determined offensive of U.S., coalition, and Afghan forces retook Chora not long after it had fallen in 2006, it was now clear that occasional patrols, raids, and the feeling that the population's support for GIRoA was sufficient to stop the Taliban from holding the area were tragically wrong. A new approach was required for the area, one where a persistent presence of security forces would be able to protect the population from insurgent intimidation.

## **Chora: Interregnum**

In the intervening years, new efforts were undertaken to provide the sustained security Chora required and to better link it to the provincial capital. A series of patrol bases were constructed from the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt to the Chora area, protecting key lines of communication along and within the river basin. The patrol bases occupied key geographical points that insurgents had used for attacks, protected main roads and population centers, and provided areas for the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) to stage out of to patrol the region.

Subsequently, a new military base was constructed in Chora, which meant that only one district in the province did not have an enduring coalition forces presence. This forward operating base also became a hub for the ANA and a means of support to Chora District's chief of police as well as its district governor. These additional forces served a crucial role in preventing a second Taliban attempt to overrun the district center in 2007. Additionally, as security improved in the area, a new paved road was built linking Chora to Tarin Kowt, as well as to the northernmost district of Uruzgan called Gizab.

When the Netherlands assumed responsibility for Uruzgan in 2006, its greater focus on the development of the province—added to the Australian government's efforts that had started after their arrival in late 2005—greatly improved living conditions in the Chora area. A new bridge was constructed, improving access from the district to Tarin Kowt. An electrification project was completed, more schools were constructed, and additional water and economic project improvements were completed.

Although security had improved through the placement and growth of formal security forces, the community was still not enlisted in its own defense. The temporary suspension of violence did not mean violence was absent. The ANA was comprised of soldiers from all over Afghanistan so they lacked a local connection to the people. The ANP, though largely drawn from Uruzgan, were not from the Chora area, were predominantly loyal to the Populzai-dominated government in Tarin Kowt, or both, which meant there was a sense of antipathy between them and the people as well. It is difficult for a community to embrace a police force which is regarded, at least in part, as an occupation force.

Additionally, special operations forces (SOF) had established two village stability platform sites north of Chora District center and along the Tarin Kowt/Chora/Gizab Road.<sup>3</sup> These sites were comprised of SOF living in Afghan villages full-time, recruiting and training Afghan Local Police (ALP) in their respective areas. This ensured the road remained secure up to the northern district of Gizab and better enabled the small population centers along them to resist Taliban intimidation. While security had stabilized in the area, the tribal situation had become markedly more fluid.

Following his removal as provincial chief of police in 2006, Barakzai tribal leader Rozi Khan was elected



(Photo by Spc. Wes Conroy, 55th Signal Company Combat Camera)

An Afghan Local Police (ALP) commander congratulates 12 new ALP members during a graduation ceremony 27 March 2012 in Kalach Village, Chora District, Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan. The members finished a three-week course that covered basic policing procedures, weapons handling, and other skills necessary to protect and defend Afghan citizens. The graduation of this ALP Academy class was the first in Kalach Village.

district governor of Chora. In the summer of 2008, he was accidentally killed by coalition forces in a nighttime operation. His death destabilized the Barakzai tribe, a tribe with much influence in Chora. His son, Mohammed Daoud Khan, assumed his leadership mantle and continued as the district chief of Chora and head of his family until his removal from office by GIRoA in late 2010. The assassination of Daoud Khan in late 2011, in part retaliation for the assassination of Populazi tribal leader and former governor Jan Mohammed Khan in Kabul in late summer 2011, further weakened the Barakzai tribe's leadership. It was widely thought within the Populzai tribe that Mohammed Daoud Khan was to blame for the killing of Jan Mohammed Khan although this was never proven.

Rozi Khan's next youngest son, Khoshal, assumed the leadership of the Barakzai tribe, but since he and his older brother were only in their early to mid-twenties, their tribal position was contested by other Barakzai elders seeking to improve their tribal, political, and social situation. The Achikzai tribal leader, who had originally been district governor of Chora in 2001-2002, had subsequently been elected as one of the province's representatives to Afghanistan's parliament. As a political opponent of then governor Jan Mohammed Khan, his election to Parliament in 2005 came as bit of a surprise, and his alliance with Rozi Khan acted as an effective

check on any predatory tendencies of the Populzai-dominated provincial government. It also ensured that their respective tribal members had strong representation in tribal and government affairs.

His subsequent defeat in 2010, in part orchestrated through an election process that fell short of international standards of transparency, prompted him to depart the province and reside in Kabul. His new residence protected him from any local assassination attempts organized by his tribal opponents, but it also weakened his local tribe's power since he was not as able to protect their interests while away.

In this context of weakened tribal leadership and enhanced but temporary security, the Taliban were able to increase their foothold in the Chora region. While the ANA undertook occasional patrols in the area, they had negotiated nonaggression pacts with the Taliban so that their routes and schedules were already known by the enemy. Additionally, while the ANP were more reliably anti-Taliban, the fact that many of them had come from Tarin Kowt, which meant they were outsiders to Chora, prevented them from having as close a relationship with local residents as they could have had. This tendency was especially acute since there remained a lingering perception that the ANP were simply outgrowths of Populzai tribal power seeking to encroach into other tribal areas. Nevertheless, the ANP were able to construct four ALP



checkpoints on their own, protecting some population centers, but not enough to deny the Taliban access to the population. They lacked the manpower to do so.

The Taliban took advantage of this tribal power vacuum, the compromised ANA, and the insufficient ANP to expand their power base in the area. By constantly attacking the ANP through direct attacks, suicide-vest attacks, and car bombs, the Taliban hobbled the police force. Following the transition to Afghan control of two village stability platform sites in northern Chora due to success in recruiting ALP, the SOF team that arrived in Chora's district center in late spring 2012 prepared to shift the balance of power away from the Taliban and toward GIRoA. Unlike the district of Shahid-e-Hasas, the team's approach required more than simply growing ALP. It required a proactive approach to push the Taliban out, rehabilitate and empower tribal structures, reassure GIRoA allies, and shape the physical terrain to inhibit the Taliban's infiltration routes.

### **Chora: 2012, the People Respond**

The special operations team that arrived in Chora in 2012 had already gained experience in establishing ALP and was familiar with the larger issues of Chora from having run a village stability platform site in the same district. The team quickly determined that it had to create breathing space for tribal engagement to take place and for local officials to begin to see the seriousness of the team's intention to push the Taliban out. There had long been a view held by locals in the area that coalition forces had adopted

a "live and let live" attitude when it came to confronting the Taliban insurgency.

In an effort to dispel this perception, clearing operations began soon after the team's arrival—a mix of partnered Afghan Commando raids, determined clearing operations with similarly partnered Afghan National Army units, and embedded mentoring with the Afghan National Police. As these operations pushed the Taliban back, the team began an active round of community engagements, principally with Barakzai tribal elders, to begin the process of recruiting local military-age males to serve in the ALP. This process uncovered a certain elder who, with his sons, was working with the Taliban to extend his personal power in the region but had enough plausible deniability to seek contracts with the coalition and political influence with GIRoA. This local spoiler could not be killed unless he engaged in hostile acts, but he could be marginalized.

His true intentions were discerned through his early suggestion to build a particular police checkpoint near his village, a task he thought would take the team months to complete but was accomplished within a few days. Then, when he was pressed for ALP recruits, he demurred and left the area. This hidden hand of the insurgency, partly political and partly tribal, had helped serve as the backbone of the Taliban's shadow government in the area. The team established a checkpoint near his residence that effectively put pressure on him and his family to either turn away from the insurgency or at least remain neutral. Subsequent engagements with area elders signaled an interest by the community to join the ALP but also indicated concern



(U.S. Navy photograph by Chief Petty Officer Bill Mesta)

A security barrier in the Chora Valley, Chora District, Afghanistan provides an imposing barricade 8 August 2012. The security barrier, nicknamed the "Great Wall of Chora," has proven effective in reducing insurgent activity in the region.

about how enduring the SOF presence would be and whether Taliban control would return. The team sought to remove these concerns through active patrolling, playing a leading role in the weekly security coordination meeting with the ANA and ANP, and having the ANP chief live at their base.

Additionally, the team actively supported the ANP in their efforts to expand their freedom of movement, or "white space," and worked by, with, and through them in community interactions to bolster their local status. While both ANP and ALP numbers increased (the ALP went from 40 in the town of Chora to 155), the insurgents were still utilizing the lush undergrowth of the river valley to move between checkpoints, attack the ANP and SOF at times of their choosing, and conceal their activities. Many of these attacks were traced to a village called Nyazi, southwest of Chora and just over the border in Tarin Kowt District.

## The Great Wall of Chora

The SOF unit came up with a plan to stem this flow of fighters and to stop their logistical support, but it was unorthodox and risky. The idea was simple and without precedent in the area, and it was difficult to gauge how the community would react. Following continued insurgent attacks against ALP commanders, the ANP, and its

leadership; suicide motorcycle attacks; and at least one successful suicide-vest attack among many attempts; the leadership of Village Stability Platform Chora decided to physically cut the "green zone" of vegetation in half through the construction of a wall—the "Great Wall of Chora." The wall was intended to help the expanding ALP cut off Nyazi Village, the center of Taliban activity, and inhibit insurgent infiltration up from Tarin Kowt to the north, or down from Chora.

Clearing operations in the area opened the way, and the SOF team began construction of the great wall. In total, it would consume more than 100 Hesco barriers—the wire and fabric baskets which, when filled with dirt and rocks, form a bulletproof barrier—and multiple spools of concertina wire. The team brought out earth movers and shovels and began its work in earnest, creating an unbroken barrier at the narrowest point of the cultivated land.

The SOF team soon discovered that the land selected was not only owned by one family, which simplified compensation payments for land use, but that they were great supporters of GIROA. The leading brother had in fact been teaching school privately in his own home out of fear of Taliban repression if he had been more public with his activities. As the wall was constructed, the brothers volunteered to fill the Hesco barriers and, following their actions, so did other members of the community. The wall was completed after two days of work, and the leading landowner who was running the secret school requested that he be named the commander of the wall. The SOF team gave him one of their patches with the future promise of a sheriff's badge.

It was becoming clear that the community embraced this unorthodox security strategy. Each end of the wall had a checkpoint, and a third checkpoint was located at its center. Two mountains formed natural barriers around the river valley, which forced road traffic past the two checkpoints at either end of the wall. Any foot traffic through the fields would have to pass by the central checkpoint. The wall had an immediate and dramatic effect on security. When a Taliban probing patrol against the wall had been intercepted by the SOF team and killed, more villagers joined the ALP, and the ANP became more confident in their ability to conduct their own operations. As security improved, a more determined clearing operation commenced, which discovered a Taliban command center in the village and, later, two suicide vests that were subsequently destroyed.

## Conclusion

The growth of ALP forces as well as the ANP, and the construction of a series of checkpoints throughout Chora, dramatically improved security in the area and began to physically push the Taliban out. In addition, the wall's sheer presence also demonstrated to local villagers, GIROA officials, and tribal leaders that security could be established and become an enduring condition instead of a temporary, unsustainable effect.

The growth of the Afghan local security forces was greatly enabled by the simultaneous construction of the Great Wall of Chora, which set the conditions for securing the villages of Nyazi and Chora. Through shaping the physical terrain of the Chora Valley, the wall stemmed insurgent infiltration into the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt and secured a section of the Tarin Kowt/Chora/Gizab Road, which had long been subject to improvised explosive device attacks.

Moreover, security conditions in the district of Chora began to dramatically improve when SOF in the area launched aggressive offensive operations to push the Taliban back. These actions reassured local Afghan allies about U.S. determination to defeat the Taliban in the area instead of merely coexisting with them. Offensive operations were followed by a robust embedded partnering plan with the ANP and increased support for their efforts. Village Stability Platform Chora liaised with the provincial chief of police to ensure greater materiel and

logistical support as well as to improve the morale of the battered force. Additionally, the subsequent removal of an ineffective district governor and the marginalization of a Taliban sympathizer demonstrated to other locals that GIROA was serious about bringing security and governance to their community.

A community engagement strategy of partnering with and empowering tribal elders to both grow Afghan local police forces and to get them more involved in local political affairs had an extremely positive effect and furthered the rehabilitation of tribal leadership structures. Residents were actively enlisted in their own defense.

Facilitated by U.S. efforts, they participated in local security forces and played an active role in community institutions. The result was that the Taliban were unable to physically intimidate the population, entice it to their cause through payments, or take advantage of its grievances to separate the people from their government.

A balanced approach of using kinetic and nonkinetic strategies greatly enhanced security in the greater Chora Valley and demonstrated that a determined U.S. military unit can sufficiently degrade if not defeat a local Taliban insurgency, given the right approach. ■

*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not represent the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. Department of State.*

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## Notes

1. Brian Petit, "The Fight for the Village: Southern Afghanistan, 2010," *Military Review* (May-June 2011):25-32; Robert Hulslander and Jake Spivey, "Village Stability Operations and Afghan Local Police," *PRISM* 3 (2012): 125-138; Rory Hanlin, "One Team's Approach to Village Stability Operations," *Small Wars Journal*, 4 September 2011, <http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CB4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fsmallwarsjournal.com%2Fprintpdf%2F11412&ei=NsDCVJniBcangwTmmoDo-Aw&usg=AFQjCNHBiO97p2cKEJ0cVGuKyLjXbM3Law&bv=bv.84349003> (accessed 5 February 2015).

2. Seth G. Jones, "Community Defense in Afghanistan," *Joint Force Quarterly* 57 (2nd Quarter 2010):9-15; Seth G. Jones and Arturo Munoz, *Afghanistan's Local War: Building Local Defense Forces*, RAND Corporation Report, 2010.

3. Village Stability Platforms (VSPs) are sites from which special operations forces conduct village stability operations.