COUNTERINSURGENCY PRACTICES IN AN ECONOMY-OF-FORCE ROLE:
ZABUL PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN 2006 – 2009

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By

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ABSTRACT

Counterinsurgency doctrine espoused by the U.S. military’s field manual on the subject, FM 3-24, stresses the use of population-centric tactics in order to separate the insurgents from the local population. This effort is manpower intensive, and thus resources must be concentrated in high priority areas, generally at a ratio of 20 counterinsurgents for every 1,000 residents. Current doctrine and theory do not directly address the best methods for use in low priority areas where force ratios cannot possibly match this ideal. This thesis will show that, in a rural insurgency such as the one in Afghanistan’s Zabul province, units facing such a situation have concluded that the counterinsurgent’s best local option is to establish and protect pockets of government control inside each district that create a “grass is greener” effect for residents in adjacent but contested areas. This strikes a balance between total withdrawal and large, but temporary, offensive operations that are unable to remain in an area after clearing it. However, local success is just that, local. Economy of force must be approached as part of a larger whole, because insurgents often flee local success for areas that offer easier pickings.
To the men of the 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment and EOD Mobile Unit 8, who lost a dozen men killed and many times more wounded in Zabul Province.

I owe a debt of gratitude to all those who took time out of their busy days to revisit their often painful and frustrating experiences in Zabul and provided their insight and analysis.

Special thanks to Dr. Eli Berman and Lieutenant Colonel Karl Slaughenhaupt for helping me acquire the indispensible data for this project.

And to my friends and colleagues that never came home from Zabul:
   Captain Mark Garner
   Major Brian Mescall
   Captain Daniel Whitten

   I remember.

   Thank you all,
   Wade Cleland
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SECTION I: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

This thesis seeks to explore the problems unique to, and possible solutions for, counterinsurgency operations in what is known as an “economy of force” role. The term “economy of force” comes from U.S. military doctrine. The Army’s Field Manual 1-02, Operational Terms and Graphics, provides the official military definition, both Army and Marine Corps, on page 1-67:

(Army) One of the nine principles of war: Allocate minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts...(Marine Corps) The allocation of minimum essential combat capability to supporting efforts, with attendant degree of risk, so that combat power may be concentrated on the main effort.

For much of the past nine years, Afghanistan has been a secondary effort, by choice, because the United States chose to invade and prioritize efforts in Iraq. In 2007, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen told a hearing of the House Armed Services Committee that, “In Afghanistan we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must.”¹ In his testimony, Mullen explicitly labeled all of Afghanistan as an economy of force operation, but commanders in the country were no more able to escape the necessity of prioritizing their efforts than were their superiors, and thus some areas were given far more attention and resources than others.

Zabul² Province, in Afghanistan’s south, has been an example of just such an “economy of force within an economy of force” for most of the past decade. Zabul’s small rural population, limited

² Note on spelling: There is no standardized set of place names in Zabul province. In maps and in further readings slight variations may occur. These are interchangeable, such as Daychopan and Deh Chopan, or Shajui, Shahjoy, and Shajoy. However, for the purposes of this paper I selected the usage most commonly found in my readings and interviews.
resources, and near-total lack of infrastructure have contributed to coalition forces’ designation of certain provinces, such as Helmand and Kandahar, as priorities of effort. These high priority areas receive the most attention in terms of troops and resources, thus consigning Zabul to the “back burner.”

Combating an insurgency in a secondary effort creates a set of challenges for the counterinsurgent, especially in terms of the number of troops and resources available for operations. In a world of finite resources and facing the likelihood of stagnant defense budgets, the United States and its allies will almost certainly be faced with similar prioritization requirements in any future conflicts. Given the United States’ overwhelming conventional superiority, conflicts in the near future are likely to feature opponents unable to contend in regular warfare, who must make use of asymmetric and guerrilla or insurgent tactics. If counterinsurgencies and limited resources are two key features of the emerging security landscape, it makes sense to examine the cases where the resource-intensive requirements of counterinsurgency doctrine collide with the problem of limited troops and resources to see what applicable lessons can be learned and applied towards future conflicts.

This thesis will argue that counterinsurgency doctrine and theory do not adequately address the challenges unique to forces operating in an economy of force role and advances the following hypothesis: That counterinsurgency operations in such an environment are best accomplished using decentralized troops in platoon-strength to create small kernels of security around government district centers while aggressively patrolling around them to disrupt insurgent

activity in the immediate surroundings. It does so through a within-case analysis of Zabul province, Afghanistan, from 2006 through 2009, by examining lessons learned from a joint U.S.-Romanian unit in an economy of force situation.

This research is unique in that, as far as such data are publicly available, no other U.S. military unit maintained responsibility for the same geographic area for so long during either the conflict in Iraq or Afghanistan. This unique continuity offers a measure of control unavailable elsewhere, and combined with the fact that counterinsurgency efforts in Zabul were explicitly established as an economy of force operation, means that it offers an excellent opportunity to gain insight into a neglected sub-field of counterinsurgency theory and practice.

Based upon the foregoing analysis, I argue that this method of focusing on district center security provides breathing room to advance governance and development, albeit within a small area. The purpose of this limited development, outside of development for its own sake, is to create a “grass is greener” effect for the populations living in contested or insurgent-controlled areas in the vicinity of these district centers. Ultimately, the goal is to create a positive expectation towards government control among populations outside of the government’s sway. This way, when (or, if) the struggle in higher-priority areas has succeeded, the government has already set the conditions to extend its writ without souring local sentiment through excessive raiding and overreliance on air power. Counterinsurgent forces should not attempt to control areas larger than they can handle given the limits placed on them by troop numbers, terrain, weather, and the size and capability of insurgent forces. Open, endless fighting in areas the counterinsurgent cannot hold will only serve to turn the population against him and the government he supports.
There is a significant limitation to this finding. Economy of force, by its very nature, is a tool with limited means. Localized success does not necessarily translate into regional or theater-wide success. Insurgents can, and do, often avoid the counterinsurgent forces when those forces become increasingly effective, and apply their efforts elsewhere. Thus, it is imperative that provincial and regional leaders account for this situation, even as lower-level units implement the recommendations put forth here. Failure to do so simply means that the insurgency becomes someone else’s problem without actually improving the situation.

This study will begin with a review of the relevant literature on counterinsurgency in order to provide context and show the research gap in addressing economy of force situations. Next, the research question and the hypotheses the project will test will be explained, followed by a background section to provide the reader with a brief history of the situation in Afghanistan in the years following the initial U.S. invasion, with an in-depth examination of Zabul province. Next, the research method, data sources, and limitations of the study will be explained. The heart of the study will follow, as a within-case analysis of the province, examining data trends and exploring specific districts to find evidence for each possible hypothesis. The study will then conclude with an assessment of the successes and failings of the counterinsurgency efforts in an economy of force, and will produce recommendations for future actions and implications for policy.
The publication of the U.S. military’s newest field manual on counterinsurgency, FM 3-24, was widely hailed in late 2006. The manual draws heavily from the late French military officer David Galula’s *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, as well as Robert Thompson’s *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, among many others.\(^5\) Born out of the post-World War II colonial struggles of France and Britain in Indochina, Asia, and Africa, these books were produced in the 1960s and capture the lessons learned in success (the British in Malaya) and in bloody failure (the French in Algeria and Vietnam). Among their key assertions are that a military organization must be adaptive and able to learn, that countering insurgency is as much a political exercise as a military one, and that securing the population and its support are vital to the success of the counterinsurgent.\(^6\)

To defeat an insurgency, the manual recommends a general approach it likens to a three step medical emergency: 1) stop the bleeding, 2) inpatient care—recovery, and 3) outpatient care—movement to self-sufficiency. Put another way, it advocates a “clear, hold, build” strategy. FM 3-24’s approach is not meant to be entirely comprehensive. Military doctrine is intended to create a framework for a common operating picture—not for the sake of uniformity, since no two situations are alike, but rather to ensure that when assigned a task the military as a whole understands it the same way. Thus, FM 3-24 does not cover the specifics of a case such as Afghanistan in exhaustive detail appropriate to the region.

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\(^5\) *Counterinsurgency FM 3-24*, Annotated Bibliography.

Nathaniel Fick and John Nagl’s article “Counterinsurgency Manual: Afghanistan Edition” argues that inadequate troop levels are a major problem. Afghan civilians are weary of the coalition leaving them exposed after defeating the Taliban in battle. If the United States is to succeed, the authors assert, it must adapt the principles of its own doctrine (which it has been ignoring) and apply them to Afghanistan. Fick and Nagl note that according to doctrine 20 to 25 troops are required for every 1000 residents, while current troop levels are still well below that level. They offer a stark choice in the matter: add troops or change the mission.

In two RAND monographs, Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan (2008) and Afghanistan’s Local War (with Arturo Munoz, 2010) Seth Jones offers criticisms and refinements to counterinsurgency thought. His central complaint is that the assumptions upon which writers such as Nagl and Galula base their prescriptions do not necessarily match the facts. Jones’ 2008 work uses a survey of over 90 insurgencies to challenge the focus of these and other authors (all of whom strongly inform FM 3-24) on improving the efficacy of external actors. His study reveals that the success or failure of counterinsurgency campaigns hinges upon a few key factors controllable by indigenous or external actors (there are other factors, but they lie outside this realm, such as geography and ethnicity.7) These factors include indigenous security force capability, especially police forces, the quality of local governance, and the amount of external support or sanctuary available to insurgents.8 The implications of this are that the international forces in Afghanistan must begin to focus more on growing and training the Afghan National Army and National Police. If the focus is on solely on fielding large numbers of national

7 For an insightful and endlessly cited bit of research on this, see James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” American Political Science Review, Vol. 97, No. 1 (February 2003), 75–90.
8 Jones, Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, 15.
soldiers and police with no focus on their quality, all the United States may do is exacerbate the insurgency.\textsuperscript{9}

\textit{Where Do We Go From Here?}

All of these publications, and many others like them, agree on general principles of counterinsurgency, such as good governance and protecting the population. These authors agree in two more important respects: nearly all of them made mention that over-reliance on airpower in Afghanistan is counterproductive, and that more troops are needed to achieve force levels capable of successfully performing counterinsurgency tasks. What is missing from most of this work is a frank discussion on cases that fall between the cracks. In Afghanistan, there are many areas where U.S. and Afghan troops are present, but not in numbers required to perform counterinsurgency adequately. Although there are signs this is changing, for most of the Afghanistan campaign, troops have been holding outposts without the capability of securing the surrounding areas.\textsuperscript{10} If the political and military leadership are unwilling to pull them out, yet will not give them the numbers of men required to succeed, are there practices or methods that can at least allow the personnel stuck in these situations to make progress, or to at least avoid doing damage to their cause? The answers do not appear in military counterinsurgency doctrine, and classic COIN texts offer out-of-date options that are unpalatable for the U.S. public, although recently some officers have submitted proposals in military journals.

\textsuperscript{9} Daniel L. Byman, \textit{Going to War with the Allies You Have: Allies, Counterinsurgency, and the War on Terrorism} (Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, November 2005), 3.
Economy-of-Force

The French counterinsurgency effort in Algeria, along with those of the British in Malaya and the Americans in Vietnam are where FM 3-24 draws many of its lessons. Whereas the field manual does not explicitly address economy of force situations, a classic option for such scenarios does exist. Population displacement and resettlement into government-controlled areas was used in Algeria and Malaya as an acceptable option for a population-centric COIN effort. If the objective is to separate the insurgent from the populace, then relocating the population and concentrating them in areas the government holds achieves that end. In Algeria, the tactic proved effective in the short term, but the brutality of the “regroupment” policy not only disgusted the French population once conditions in the camps became public, it also failed in the long term in part because the insurgency could survive in cross-border sanctuaries and simply waited out the French army in those regions.\textsuperscript{11} In Malaya, the British established what they called the “New Village” program, in which ethnic Chinese villagers were moved out of the rural jungle districts and into camps behind chain-link fence and barbed wire. These “villages” were generally humane, and served to protect the villagers from insurgent intimidation. Coupled with effective government administration that paid attention to the needs of the Chinese population, the technique also proved effective, and resulted in long term success.\textsuperscript{12} However, this particular success owes much to its peculiar circumstances. The Malaysian communist insurgents were almost exclusively ethnic Chinese, and could thus not move unnoticed among the Malay majority. Additionally, their source of arms and financial/logistical support was almost

\textsuperscript{11}Alistair Horne, \textit{A Savage War of Peace}, (New York: Penguin, 1979), Chapter 16, “Neither Djebel nor Night.”
exclusively internal; external aid and cross-border sanctuary played very little role in their operations.\textsuperscript{13} These facts made the resettlement a feasible approach to isolating the ethnic Chinese insurgents, but they also highlight the limits of its applicability to Afghanistan’s relatively homogeneous Pashtun insurgency with a sanctuary in Pakistan.

Of course, even if relocating the population of rural Afghanistan could be successful, such a step would not meet the threshold of moral and political acceptability for the United States and its European allies. Classic theory, then, seems not to have been fully updated from its colonial sensibilities.

More recent work relevant to the topic can be found as well. An article by a former battalion commander in the Army’s 173\textsuperscript{rd} Airborne Brigade, Michael Fenzel, proposes changes to tailor the U.S. approach in Afghanistan that address some of the concerns present in an economy-of-force situation. He advocates a district-level campaign that replaces appointed district governors with locally elected ones, establishing a local security force, and devolving Afghan National Army, National Police, coalition Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and Afghan intelligence service personnel out of their current centralized organizations and down into company-level organizations in every district.\textsuperscript{14} This is eminently sensible, since Afghanistan’s population is largely rural and the ANA and PRTs often work out of large bases that can serve to insulate them from the local population. Fenzel served in eastern Afghanistan in 2007-2008, and is undoubtedly familiar with the challenges facing units in economy-of-force situations. His proposal unfortunately requires conditions and troop numbers that may not be available to such

\textsuperscript{13} Nagl, \textit{Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife}, 64.

units. The same applies to an apparent incident of local success in Khost Province in 2008, detailed by Anne Marlowe of the Weekly Standard.\textsuperscript{15} In this case the unit in question had 687 American paratroopers at its disposal to pair with local forces in each district. The Afghan National Army is unlikely to be capable of supporting such widely scattered forces on its own for some time, and in places like Zabul province between 2006 and 2009, the few districts with a permanent U.S. presence were manned by a single a platoon of troops—one-third the number in Fenzel’s model. Fenzel’s proposal has merit, but it is unproven yet in practice. It is still worthwhile, therefore, to attempt to discover what innovations may have been developed by other units that have not been passed on or implemented across the military as an institution. What is likely happening in these situations is what happened in Iraq prior to 2006.\textsuperscript{16} Units are doing the best they can, without a formal system to pass on best practices or structure counterinsurgency behavior in an under-resourced environment. The rest of this paper aims to help fill in some of the gaps.

**Research Question and Hypotheses**

This research aims to answer the question: What happens when the U.S. military or its coalition partners choose to conduct a counterinsurgency (COIN) operation in an economy of force situation, and what explains instances of local success? That is, when the United States and its allies commit forces in a given area that are insufficient in number according to contemporary COIN theory and military doctrine, which generally prescribe 20 to 25 counterinsurgents for every 1000 residents,\(^\text{17}\) have the results been what one would expect? Based on the precepts of the U.S. military’s FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, the expected outcome in such situations would be that the insurgency gradually worsens because the forces opposing it are insufficient in number to adequately secure the civilian population. Insufficient numbers of troops in Afghanistan have traditionally been accompanied by a heavy reliance on air power to balance the localized numerical disadvantage U.S. combat troops have often faced. This reliance on firepower has had negative effects in the past because mistakes or “collateral damage” anger the populace, erode support for the local government, and even prompts some people to join the insurgency. Given this, the conduct of counterinsurgency against a relatively strong opponent becomes problematic. The leaders of the counterinsurgents are faced with a few stark choices: cede the territory to the insurgents, commit adequate forces to secure the population, or adopt a middling approach that will likely exacerbate the problem.

Why is it important to address this study’s research question? First and foremost, the United States has been following the troublesome “middling approach” in Afghanistan for many

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years. Second, while U.S. military doctrine and counterinsurgency theory recognize that insufficient forces are problematic, they pay little attention to the practical details of defining and achieving success when the U.S. government is unwilling to withdraw from an area or unable to increase the forces there—that is, choosing to conduct COIN “on the cheap”.

**Defining Success**

Defining “success” for an economy of force operation is problematic, but the approach that fits best into the paradigms of COIN military doctrine is the following: Given a defined area of operations for a unit, success is twofold. First, the counterinsurgents achieve a significant disruption of insurgent military activity, ideally with significant insurgent attacks holding steady or declining. Second, they increase or hold steady popular support for the host nation government in areas they control, while ensuring military activity does not anger the population outside of their control. Ideally, this creates a “grass is greener” feeling among the populace in insurgent-held areas, making the location ripe for fully-resourced operations once the area finally receives the full attention of the counterinsurgency effort.

**A Caveat on “Success”**

Success, as defined here, is a very limited term intended for a low-level, district based analysis of an economy of force. While troops in a given district might improve their local situation, it is important to note that the broader implications might not net positive results for the province or region if insurgents have the freedom of movement to shift away from these areas without consequence or adjustment by the counterinsurgent.
Possible Hypotheses

This study will identify districts within an economy of force operation that appear to meet this standard of success based on an analysis of data on insurgent activity. Zabul province, Afghanistan from 2006 through 2009 is the case in question. A qualitative investigation into the operations within its relevant districts will then seek to explain the steady or declining amount of insurgent activity\(^{18}\) to support or provide evidence against the following possible explanations:

**H1: Counterinsurgent forces used battlefield innovation and institutional memory to adopt practices resulting in a local defeat of the insurgency.** This explanation argues that over time, coalition troops have learned lessons, identified best practices, institutionalized changes to reflect them, and passed them on to succeeding units, thereby limiting or reducing the effectiveness of insurgents in their area of operations.

**H2: Decline in reported insurgent activity is a result of counterinsurgent forces avoiding engagement or limiting operations.** This plays into the inevitable problem of endogeneity when assessing insurgent violence. If troops limit their activities or confine themselves to their bases, then they will likely see a reduction in the amount of activity they witness and the amount of contact they make.

**H3: Reporting on insurgent activity decreases without a change in actual incident numbers, e.g. because insurgents target Afghan forces or civilians instead of coalition**

\(^{18}\)Please see the Research Methodology, Data Sources, and Limitations section for a discussion of the data used and the limits of this approach.
forces. Reporting incidents is often done by those involved in the encounter. The limited communications equipment, loose reporting requirements, and language/cultural barriers involved mean that Afghans are less likely to report incidents, especially if they are minor and do not require outside assistance. A drop in reporting thus might not necessarily indicate a decrease in activity.

H4: Insurgent activity decreases because insurgents have reconciled with local leaders or the government. This supposes that insurgents have chosen to limit themselves and use means other than violence to achieve their aim.

H5: Insurgent activity is reduced due to tribal structures and leaders exerting greater control. Quetta Shura Taliban active in Zabul share ethnic and sometimes tribal links with the local population. Traditional power structures and leaders could possibly impose restraints on insurgent activity in their areas.

H6: Insurgents have shifted operations across district, provincial, or international borders. Instances of what appear to be local success may not be at all indicative of broader success. Insurgents might simply shift their forces to areas more advantageous to themselves for reasons that have nothing to do with coalition efforts in the areas they are leaving.

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Although this list is not exhaustive, it does cover a broad range of possible explanations for an ostensible decline in insurgent activity. In the case of Zabul province, I expect to find the most support for hypotheses 1 and 6, limited support for hypotheses 2 and 3, and little support for hypotheses 4 and 5. It is most likely that coalition troops will become more effective over time if they are adaptable, learning organizations, but this success may simply result in insurgents shifting locations, given the limited number of troops available in economy of force situations.
BACKGROUND: AFGHANISTAN AND ZABUL PROVINCE

Zabul Province, from 2006 to 2009, presents a unique opportunity to perform a within-case analysis. During that period, U.S. forces reduced their presence significantly in the province, ceding large areas to the Taliban. A joint Romanian-U.S. task force was formed that rotated men from a single American unit in and out of the province in roughly six month intervals. This sort of continuity in a U.S. unit is unprecedented in Afghanistan, and the results of a relatively stable force structure for three years means the ability to control for numbers and focus on the comparative differences in results achieved by these units.

Afghanistan, 2001-2006

As is well known, the United States toppled the ruling Taliban government following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. By early 2002 the Taliban had largely disbanded or fled into neighboring Pakistan. Because the United States defeated the Taliban so quickly with a relatively tiny force, Afghanistan was suddenly faced with a security vacuum. U.S. leaders made a deliberate yet contentious decision to adopt a “light footprint” approach to Afghan security—in part to avoid what they viewed as the Soviet mistake of attempting to occupy the country with heavy forces, and because the Bush administration was husbanding its resources in order to invade Iraq.²⁰

It soon became evident that this approach could not effectively secure the countryside. The process of standing up an effective Afghan army and police force was time consuming and could not be accomplished quickly enough. Sensing the gap in security and using bases in

Pakistan, insurgents from the Taliban movement as well as other groups began increasing their activity inside Afghanistan. In June 2003, the U.S. Ambassador and the commanding general of U.S. forces convinced President Bush to approve a policy shift from simple counterterrorism to nation-building and counterinsurgency. At that point only 12,000 coalition troops were present in the entire country, and they were under explicit orders to avoid even using the word “counterinsurgency” while remaining largely aloof from the population and conducting periodic raids.\textsuperscript{21} The shift in strategy increased these forces to around 30,000 and created two regional commands to take responsibility for the areas of declining security, one in the south and one in the east.

These forces were moderately successful, notably in ensuring a generally fair and free set of elections in 2004 and 2005. However, in 2005 the United States remained focused on Iraq and moved its proven ambassador and commander, Zalmay Khalilzad there from Afghanistan. Lieutenant General David Barno rotated out of Afghanistan that same year, disrupting the effective civil-military team that had been in place since 2003.\textsuperscript{22} It was at this point that the insurgency began to gather momentum. Starting in 2004, Pakistan had largely left its tribal regions unmolested, giving the various networks an opportunity to regain strength and reorganize. At the same time, the United States announced that it would be turning over military operations to NATO and withdrawing 2,500 troops.\textsuperscript{23} This almost certainly reinforced or created doubts about the long-term commitment of the United States among the Afghan populace and the insurgents.

\textsuperscript{22} Jones, \textit{In the Graveyard of Empires}, 180.
\textsuperscript{23} Barno,42.
In mid-2006, the United States turned over control of the international forces to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). NATO forces assumed command of Regional Command-South (RC-S), while U.S. forces remained in control of Regional Command-East, just as fighting in the country reached and surpassed levels not seen since 2001. From that point forward, U.S. troop levels remained generally steady until 2009 when they began sharply increasing as the new administration turned its attention away from Iraq.25

Zabul Province: Terrain and People

![Figure 1: Zabul Province](http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Province.34.aspx)

Zabul province was created administratively in 1963 out of the northeastern portion of Kandahar province, and was expanded in 2005 to incorporate areas of western Ghazni province. Its population is Pashtun, from two main tribal groups, and estimates on total population range from 250,000 to 365,000 spread across over 1,500 villages. Zabul is extremely poor. Its

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27 Population data are necessarily imprecise. UN data are from 2004, prior to the province’s enlargement, and the likelihood of 250,000 being an accurate count is unlikely according to officers that have served in the province, who
population is mainly rural and many farmers work on a subsistence level. A single paved road runs from east to west through the center of the province, the strategic Highway 1, also known as the “ring road,” connecting Kabul and Kandahar. The terrain of the province begins relatively flat along its 64 kilometer with Pakistan to the south and is dotted with foothills and smaller mountains leading up to the middle “belt” of the province formed by the highway, along which roughly a third to one-half of the population lives. Approximately a quarter of the population inhabits the southern districts and the remainder live in the deep valleys of the mountainous northern half. North of the highway the terrain is characterized by peaks rising to 9,000 feet, with a major river, the Arghandab, running northeast to southwest along the range’s southern edge. This area has no real roads or bridges to speak of and is full of deep, isolated valleys. Moving between the mountain districts is laborious, with only a handful of trails passable by wheeled vehicles, and in the winter these areas are almost impossible to traverse due to chest-deep snows and bitterly cold temperatures.

The province is organized into eleven districts, which fall into three rough categories. The “highway” districts are generally flat (although “flat” Qalat district lies nearly a mile above sea level) and hold the province’s largest urban areas. Qalat, the provincial capital, is a town of roughly 30,000. The seat of government and the bulk of the government and international forces are based in and around this ancient fortress city. Northwest along highway lies Shajoy district, cite the almost total lack of infrastructure, insular nature of the northern valleys, and illiteracy in Zabul as obstacles to an accurate census even in peaceful times. Provincial administrative enlargement, village assessments, and reconnaissance efforts by military personnel have led U.S. forces to revise that figure to as much as 365,000. UN 2004 figures are available from the Afghan Information Management Service at http://www.aims.org.af/services/mapping/datasets/cso_03_04_pop_stat_388_dist.xls (accessed September 29, 2010). The higher estimates, reinforced by author conversations with U.S. personnel, can be found in: Ann Marlowe, “The Back of Beyond: A Report From Zabul Province,” World Affairs Journal March/April 2010. http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/articles/2010-MarApr/full-Marlowe-MA-2010.html (accessed October 6, 2010.) 28 Marlowe, “The Back of Beyond: A Report From Zabul Province.”
home to a town of the same name, the province’s largest, with around 40,000 inhabitants.\textsuperscript{29} Southwest lies Tarnak wa Jaldak, with the smallest population of the highway districts. The second group of districts is the “southern” set, comprised of Atghar, Shinkay, Nawbahar, and Shamulzayi. These districts are very arid and sparsely populated. Shamulzayi is the home of the only official crossing of Zabul’s 64 kilometer border with Pakistan, although the surrounding terrain is so empty that bypassing it poses no problem to those wishing to avoid detection.\textsuperscript{30} The northern districts, Mizan, Arghandab, Deh Chopan, and Kakar (alternately known as Kakaran or Khak-e-Afghan) are the most remote and mountainous.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Zabul_District_Map.png}
\caption{Zabul District Map\textsuperscript{31}}
\end{figure}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{29} Cannata, 5.
\textsuperscript{30} Interview with CPT Otto Wydra, fire support officer with B Company, 2-4 Infantry, responsible for southern Zabul in spring/summer 2006. October 15, 2010.
\end{flushleft}
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, DATA SOURCES, AND LIMITATIONS

This thesis makes use of both interviews and quantitative data in its exploration of Zabul Province. In studying such a recent case, limitations on data availability are significant due to declassification and release issues with the military. This is compounded by the remote, dangerous conditions of the province. Few private or news organizations travel in, write about, or study Zabul, and those that do are often in the company of the military. The reader should keep this in mind when considering what alternative information sources might have been used in this study.

Methodology

The methodology is a qualitative, within-case analysis, but the study will employ some quantitative data. Quantifiable measures of success or failure are available in some forms, such as details on the level of insurgent violence, reported monthly in each district by the military, and known as SIGACTs, for “significant actions”. The number of attacks on military and civilian targets by insurgents will be analyzed to see where, within the province, it did and did not worsen over each six-month period. Changes of less than one standard deviation will not be considered significant. This data on violence trends will then be compared with available data on the numbers and locations of both NATO and Afghan forces.

Districts in which the level of insurgent violence, measured in the form of SIGACTs, declines are expected to have experienced an increase in counterinsurgent troop levels. Districts where such violence increases should have troop levels lower than the “20 to 25 per 1,000 residents” ideal set forth in FM 3-24. Areas where declining violence trends do not fit the
expected result of being correlated to higher troop levels will then be singled out for detailed qualitative investigation. This qualitative aspect is crucial because SIGACTs numbers can be misleading. There are a number of reasons besides force levels that might influence increases or decreases in SIGACTs reporting, such as strategic choices by insurgent leaders, or economic hardship. The purpose of the qualitative investigation is in part to provide a check on misleading data, and to provide a more complete picture of the counterinsurgency campaign outside of a simplistic measurement of an imperfect statistic.

Population centric counterinsurgency requires gaining public acceptance of the counterinsurgent. Although the U.S. military does measure and maintain a record of popular sentiment in many of its areas of operation, such data were not publicly available for this study. Access to this data would further the quantitative analysis, but its absence is unavoidable. This study will attempt to ameliorate this shortcoming by interviewing military personnel responsible for Zabul province to establish their sense of the public’s support, although this is recognized as a very limited measurement in terms of both sample size and selection bias.

The qualitative component of this study employed data derived from interviews with U.S. military leaders responsible for Zabul over the three-year period. The information provided on the anomalous cases will be compared across each of the six-month blocs to see if it is possible to draw conclusions on which methods were effective, and reinforce or detract from one of the competing hypotheses. The “anomalous” status of a district will be established initially through examining the SIGACTs trends for declining levels of reported violence. If interviews and troop levels data confirm that local reductions in violence actually took place, and were not simply a product of misleading or inaccurate reporting, the case in question will be considered successful.
and the methods employed there will be analyzed for useful policy prescriptions. Additionally, information provided by the interviews will be used to help measure the effectiveness of the efforts as a whole. Interview subjects will be asked to detail the methods used to achieve local successes, and will give their assessment of the general level of success of Afghan government and coalition forces.

\textit{Data Sources:}

The quantitative data is part of a larger set provided by the United States military to Dr. Eli Berman of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Representatives from the United States Army and the International Security Assistance Force, as well as my thesis advisor, Dr. Christine Fair, directed me to Dr. Berman, and this research would not have been possible without his generous willingness to share his data before he published his own findings.

The data itself is in the form of “SIGACTs” incident numbers for Zabul Province between January 2006 and December 2009. SIGACTs is shorthand for “significant activities,”\footnote{\textit{Intelligence Officer’s Handbook}, United States Army Training Circular No. 2-50.5, January 6, 2010, Glossary-3.} a catch-all phrase that encompasses any significant contact with enemy forces. SIGACT reporting generally includes incidents of fighting between security forces and insurgents, attacks on civilians, reports of non-violent but important actions by insurgents such as setting up illegal checkpoints or intimidating visitors, and can include reports of insurgent activity gained through electronic or signal intercepts. It is essential that the reader understand that SIGACT reporting is not standardized across the military as a whole. Even though within Zabul province most reporting was routed through a centralized intelligence cell, reporting standards for what events qualify for inclusion could not be confirmed as entirely uniform across the period of study.
Information on troop numbers and locations within the province comes from a combination of interviews with U.S. military personnel and from an unclassified briefing provided by a senior leader with over two years’ experience in the province. Interviews with other senior leaders confirmed this data’s accuracy. These same interview subjects provided information on any variations in these force levels that might have occurred during their tenure in Zabul. The data on coalition and Afghan National Army forces is very reliable and is detailed enough to make reasonably authoritative estimates of the force to population ratio in each district.\textsuperscript{33}

The qualitative investigations, as mentioned above, came in the form of interviews with members of Task Force Zabul and other U.S. units assigned to the province.\textsuperscript{34} Most of the interview subjects served as the senior U.S. commander, a duty position that also made them deputy commander for the Romanian-led task force, and thus have good insight into the workings across the province as a whole and not just in U.S.-controlled districts. A number of leaders with varying levels of responsibility were also consulted to provide insight into the details of lower-level operations when necessary.

\textit{Limitations}

The methodology of this thesis does have a significant flaw stemming from the dearth of data sources. It relies on SIGACTs data and troop levels not just in assessing individual districts, but also in selecting which districts are examined in the first place. This is problematic because increases in violence are not necessarily linked to low troop numbers, and might be explained by

\textsuperscript{33} Troop data was detailed in interviews with almost a dozen U.S. military leaders, whose responses on the subject were compared and found to be almost entirely uniform.

\textsuperscript{34} Note on interviews: All names of interview subjects listed in this thesis are pseudonyms.
other causes. Although the qualitative aspect of the investigation attempts to account for these alternate causes, without access to insurgent leaders’ plans and processes, it is impossible to do so authoritatively. This limits the certainty of the findings and should be kept in mind by the reader throughout.

As a measure of success in confronting the insurgency, SIGACTs are an imperfect yardstick. While the data do represent an important way to measure insurgent activity, the reporting itself can be subjective. The standard for what incidents qualify as “significant” and which do not is not standardized across the military, and in some cases only captures actions involving international security forces. Events involving Afghan security forces or civilians are not necessarily recorded. Without knowing who classifies incidents within the province and what standards qualify them for inclusion, one must accept that variations in incident occurrences from month to month could be much higher or lower than initially reported. Just as importantly, endogeneity is a large driver in SIGACTs reporting in Zabul. For example, one northern district, Kakar (also known as Khak-e-Afghan) experienced 51 reported events in 2006, but only 9 events in the next three years. This is not a case of success—all coalition and Afghan forces withdrew from the district in mid-2006, and only visited for reconnaissance or raids two or three times in the following three years.\textsuperscript{35}\ Similar drops in reporting occurred in several other districts without a coalition presence, and as such, the data from those districts add little value to the explanatory power of this thesis. As a result, out of 11 districts, only the 7 with regular,

\textsuperscript{35} Interviews with LTC Paul Campbell, LTC Enrique Wells, MAJ Anton Walker, and MAJ Robert Saunders. Each served as deputy commander, Task Force Zabul. Interviews conducted on September 17 and October 3-7 2010.
reliable reporting will be included in the data analysis. This will have the additional effect preventing low numbers in unoccupied or non-reporting districts from skewing the overall provincial trend downward.

As mentioned above, SIGACTs reporting can measure some aspects of insurgent activity, but it fares poorly when attempting to gauge the political success of COIN operations. Data on violence is not indicative of the willingness of a given population to cooperate with the government, especially when that violence is a product of actors from outside the community. Additionally, because the situation in areas outside of immediate coalition and Afghan government control in Zabul province was so dangerous, there is no comprehensive way to measure whether the “grass is greener” effect has worked or how widespread it may be. Anecdotal evidence is available in abundance through interviews with military personnel, but their experiences are limited to the population sample they had contact with, which is mainly in villages in the valleys that immediately adjoin those of the district centers. Villages farther out, in territory that is largely insurgent-held, have not been polled, and so it would be necessary to revisit this issue in the future through polling or further interviews once (or if) these areas are returned to government control.

The specifics of Zabul province’s geography, demographics, and level of development may also limit the generalizability of the findings. Zabul is poor, even by Afghan standards, mountainous, has almost no modern infrastructure, and its population is generally ethnically

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36 Whether or not a district’s reporting was “reliable” enough for inclusion is a judgment arrived at by consensus of the senior leaders interviewed for this thesis.
homogeneous, largely rural, and illiterate.\textsuperscript{37} The lessons learned here may be of limited utility in places such as Iraq with starkly different environments.

The data limitations mean that the useful areas of focus within the province have been largely confined to those areas with sustained reporting. As a result, the districts with at least some coalition presence have yielded the most consistent reporting, and thus have become the population set examined in this thesis. This means selection bias influenced the results to some degree, but again, it is unavoidable given the absence of reporting from the outlying areas.

SECTION II: COIN, ECONOMY OF FORCE, AND ZABUL PROVINCE

This section forms the heart of the study. The situation in Zabul at the start of the period of study is explained first, followed by an overview of the data, which is examined and used to identify districts that appear to have experienced a decline in violence. These districts are then investigated in detail to substantiate this appearance and to see what methods or situational changes might explain such “successful” instances.

ZABUL PROVINCE: MILITARY AND POLITICAL SITUATION, 2006

As the Americans ceded responsibility to ISAF in 2006, the provinces that made up RC-South—Nimruz, Helmand, Kandahar, Oruzgan, Day Kundi, and Zabul—were each given to a different country as a primary responsibility. RC-South’s commander, operating from a logistical hub at Kandahar Airfield, shifted among the multinational forces on a rotating basis. The multiple parallel command, administrative, and support relationships among the many nations involved often complicated efforts and reduced the forces available to actually “leave the wire” and conduct missions. One officer, who declined to be identified, reported attending a briefing in Kandahar in 2007 showing that between RC-South and the majority-U.S. RC-East, the total numbers of troops were about the same, but that the number of combat troops in RC-South was around half the number of those in the east.\(^{38}\) Even if this is a slight exaggeration, it does illustrate the complicating factors that affect collective action in RC-South. Many of the nations that volunteered to contribute troops to ISAF sent the wrong kinds of troops, or sent them with restrictions, known as “caveats,” that effectively prevented them from participating in combat operations. The result was only a handful of nations willing to commit combat forces to

\(^{38}\) Interview, October 14, 2010.
southern Afghanistan, mainly British, Canadian, and Dutch troops—in fact, over year into the handover, RC-South was still 3,000 troops short of its planned force levels.\textsuperscript{39}

Zabul province suffered as a result. The only country in 2006 willing to commit a significant number of troops was Romania, a nation with an army with a much lower level of capability than its western European counterparts. Romania, although willing, simply did not possess the same capabilities of the Dutch, British or Canadian militaries, in terms of equipment, communications, and transport. Their forces were still emerging from their Soviet-era legacy, and they arrived with Soviet-vintage BTR wheeled armored vehicles and communications equipment. To assume control of Zabul they would require help, requested from the United States European Command in the form of a small infantry unit and assorted “enablers.” The United States contributed an infantry company and a small headquarters element from U.S. Army Europe’s 1\textsuperscript{st} Battalion, 4\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Regiment (1-4 Infantry) out of Hohenfels, Germany, along with Explosive Ordinance Disposal teams from the U.S. Navy’s EOD Mobile Unit 8 in Sigonella, Italy, and Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (specialized personnel trained to direct air strikes) from U.S. Air Forces, Europe.\textsuperscript{40} This joint force was organized as Task Force Zabul,\textsuperscript{41} with the U.S. forces placed under a Romanian infantry battalion and its commander, with a major from 1-4 Infantry serving as the task force deputy commander.

\textsuperscript{39} Jones, \textit{In the Graveyard of Empires}, 278-279.
\textsuperscript{40} Cannata, 2.
\textsuperscript{41} At the end of 2008 this force was renamed the Romanian-American Battle Group. TF Zabul became the aegis under which the entire province was organized, under a full colonel. This was done to move the coordinating ability and command authority of most units in the province under one umbrella. Prior to this the Romanian commander of TF Zabul had only “coordinating authority,” which required consensus building and personality driven cooperation to achieve province wide objectives, resulting in inefficiencies. For simplicity’s sake, TF Zabul will continue to refer to the joint U.S./Romanian infantry force that later became the Ro-Am Battle Group.
The U.S. unit they were set to relieve, Task Force Warrior—interestingly comprised of their reinforced sister battalion, 2-4 Infantry from the 10th Mountain Division—was a significantly larger and more capable force than TF Zabul. Total provincial coalition forces numbered around 1200 troops, with forces stationed in every district. The Romanian-American force sent to relieve them numbered only around 600 troops, meaning that some difficult decisions had to be made. All southern districts were turned over to Afghan National Army units, accompanied by American advisors, with a Special Forces team remaining in Shinkay. Romanian wheeled units would take responsibility, along with the ANA, for the highway districts because of their limited mobility and greater numbers when compared to the U.S. infantry company, which would take responsibility for the northern districts. The U.S. troops placed one of their three 40-man platoons in Deh Chopan, one in Mizan, and one in Arghandab, co-located with a second Special Forces team. The northernmost district, Kakar, was abandoned entirely because it was too remote for Afghan forces to hold and there were not enough U.S. troops to secure a base there and still conduct operations. By mid-2006 the handover had begun, and by the fall Task Force Warrior had largely returned to the United States to begin training to go to Iraq as part of the “surge” the following year.

42 Interview with LTC Paul Campbell, Deputy Commander, Task Force Zabul, 2006, October 5, 2010.
43 Campbell interview.
44 Wydra interview.
Figure 3: Coalition Force Locations, 2007.\textsuperscript{45}

\textit{Coalition Forces at ISAF Assumption of Responsibility}

As mentioned above, the total coalition forces in Zabul were significantly reduced in mid-2006. Task Force Zabul forces numbered around 600, accompanied by around 100 personnel in the Qalat-based Provincial Reconstruction Team, responsible for development and governance aspects of the effort. Romanian troops patrolled the highway, which RC-South designated as the primary focus of the provincial efforts. The initial Romanian contribution

\textsuperscript{45} Unclassified chart provided by a former U.S. military senior advisor to Afghan security forces in Zabul province.
grew over time, expanding to 800 troops in 2008 and again to nearly 900 in 2009.\textsuperscript{46} The U.S.
platoons from 1-4 Infantry were given the nebulous task of “disrupting” Taliban forces in the
mountainous north—the idea being to interfere with their freedom of movement and keep them
busy north of Highway 1. Forcing the Taliban to spend time and dedicate manpower in the
mountains was intended to limit their activity along the accessible ribbon of paved road that was
viewed as Zabul’s best chance for commerce, development, and improved prosperity.\textsuperscript{47} There
were also three 12-man Special Forces teams in the province, one operating from Qalat, one to
the south of the highway in Shinkay district, and one in Arghandab district to the north. The
bulk of the forces in the province came from the Afghan National Army and National Police.
The 2\textsuperscript{nd} Brigade, 205\textsuperscript{th} Corps of the ANA was assigned to Zabul and based itself out of Qalat,
with smaller forces operating in or near most district centers. Zabul was also assigned around
1,000 police officers, while nominally the ANA brigade consisted of around 3,000 soldiers
organized into five battalions (three maneuver, two support) referred to by their Pashto
designation, “kandaks”.\textsuperscript{48}

Unfortunately, while these forces seem to have fairly robust numbers, they often proved
to be smaller in practice, due to high turnover rates and desertion. In some cases corrupt
officials, particularly within the police structure, reported more men present for duty than were
actually around in order to collect their salaries from Kabul. Within the ANA, the actual
practical fighting strength could be as little as 1/3 that of their nominal strength. Although each

\textsuperscript{46} Cannata, p.7.
\textsuperscript{47} Interviews with Campbell and MAJ Anton Walker, October 5, 2010.
\textsuperscript{48} Interview with MAJ Roberto Saunders, deputy commander of TF Zabul (later the Romanian-American Battle
kandak might be authorized 600 men, they typically fielded half that number or fewer.\textsuperscript{49}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{ANAEVT Locator_Summer07.png}
\caption{Afghan Force Locations, 2007.\textsuperscript{50}}
\end{figure}

If one uses the conservative population estimate of 250,000 for the province, FM 3-24’s rough prescription for the province in terms of force levels (20 to 25 per 1,000 residents) comes to between 5,000 and 6,250 counterinsurgents. Using the nominal, authorized strength of the government and coalition forces as estimates gives around 5,000 troops and policemen. This, of course, is an overestimate, and the numbers of effective counterinsurgent troops is likely much

\textsuperscript{49} Campbell interview.
\textsuperscript{50} Unclassified chart provided by a former U.S. military senior advisor to Afghan security forces in Zabul province.
lower. The distribution of forces within Zabul was uneven, for a variety of reasons, so data analysis will be checked against local force levels within each district to see if parity with FM 3-24’s force prescription was achieved in such instances.

**SIGACTs Trends, 2006-2009**

In order to give the reader a sense of the general level of violence in the province, figures 5 and 6 show that, with one exception, Qalat has been the most violent district, and that there have been instances of localized declines in incident reporting in several districts over the study period.

![Figure 5: Zabul district SIGACTs trends, selected districts.](image-url)
Figure 6: Zabul district SIGACTs Totals, selected districts.

Identifying Districts with no Improvement in Reported SIGACTs

Within the seven district set, there are multiple instances in which SIGACTs trends either remained relatively constant (within one standard deviation) or decreased. However, there are two districts in which violence trends match the expected result of a gradually worsening insurgency, Shinkay and Qalat.
As seen above, even when error bars for standard deviation are included, each district’s violence levels increased over time. Interviews with U.S. military leaders confirm this trend. Violence spiked along the highway districts, especially Qalat, as “fighting season” (the period after the spring thaw that runs until the onset of the next winter) began in 2009. This violence did not coincide with a significant increase in counterinsurgent troops in the district, and may reflect a desire by Taliban leadership to have as much an impact as possible on the security situation along Highway 1 as they could until the scheduled “surge” in forces began late that year.  

Identifying Districts with Improvement in Reported SIGACTs

The remaining five districts appear, at least through the limited lens of SIGACTs reporting, to have had at least some measure of success in limiting insurgent activity. Within the “highway” districts, Shahjoy seems to have held relatively steady from 2006 through 2008, then worsened in 2009. Tarnak Wa Jaldak was steady in 2006 and 2007, spiked with violence 2008, then saw a significant reduction in 2009. Among the northern districts, over a two year period from 2006 through 2008, Arghandab and Mizan showed slight improvement, although Mizan experienced a sharp uptick in SIGACTs in 2009. Deh Chopan was home to the most dramatic swing, with violence nearly doubling in 2007, then dropping off dramatically from 2008 onward. The qualitative investigation into these periods of interest is broken down by geographic area, examining the northern and highway districts in turn. Success in each district will be assessed qualitatively, and the methods employed by the units responsible for the areas will be identified. Following district-level assessments, the province as a whole will be assessed for

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51 Saunders interview.
unifying themes and explanations for steady or decreasing insurgent activity for those districts confirmed as successes will be identified. These explanations will then be used to support or argue against the competing hypotheses in determining possible causes for a reduction in insurgent activity in an economy of force.
The three northern districts studied here, Mizan, Arghandab, and Deh Chopan, were the responsibility of the U.S. infantry company from the 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment assigned to support Task Force Zabul. Each district had one U.S. infantry platoon of around 40 men, along with a small force from the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police numbered around 30. Arghandab had a slightly larger force than the others because its platoon shared an outpost with a Special Forces detachment. As Task Force Zabul assumed control of these districts, it was not given a formal operations order—the instructions, usually written, that detail a mission and its objectives—from RC-South, and instead was given a general set of priorities and broad leeway to operate within those priorities. Since maintaining freedom of

movement along the highway corridor was most important, that area received the most attention. The American troops were pushed into the mountains to occupy three tiny outposts, but the orders they received in a welcome brief were not necessarily appropriate for their size and capability level. The troops in Mizan were tasked to “secure” their district, while those in Arghandab and Deh Chopan were ordered to “disrupt” the Taliban in their districts, all to the purpose of drawing the enemy away from Highway 1 and keeping Taliban fighters occupied in the mountains. The doctrinal definition of “securing” Mizan would prove impossible with a platoon, and the Task Force Zabul leadership never bothered to implement it, changing the focus to a “disrupt” mission in line with the other districts.

In all three districts, the U.S. force posture limited the type and extent of missions that could reasonably be undertaken. Because the infantry company was spread across three widely separated outposts, it could never make use of its full numbers during operations. Doing so would mean completely abandoning one or two districts and the base therein, for the duration of the operation. Force protection requirements meant that one of three rifle squads in each platoon could not leave the outpost because it was on guard duty. This meant that at any one time, no more than two-thirds of the total force, perhaps 80 men, could actually be “outside the wire” conducting operations. This is an important point for an economy of force mission, because the unit involved here could not achieve any sort of economy of scale in its operations. It was instead forced to devote a significant amount of time just to maintaining the flow of supplies to

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53 Walker, Campbell interviews.
54 From FM 1-02 Operational Terms and Graphics- secure: to gain possession of a position or terrain feature with or without force, and to make such disposition as will prevent, as far as possible, its destruction or loss by enemy action. Mizan is a large area with a major river, isolated valleys, no infrastructure, and a population of at least 12,000. Securing it with 40 men was out of the question.
55 Interviews with TF Zabul members confirm that this remained unchanged from 2006 until the arrival of additional forces in Afghanistan in late 2009.
each platoon and securing each outpost. This effectively diminishes the man-hours available to conduct counterinsurgency operations by a far greater extent than it would a larger unit because nearly the same effort is required to support a much larger unit in such widely scattered areas. To illustrate this it is worth noting that the closest outpost from the logistical hub in Qalat, Forward Operating Base (FOB) Lagman, was Fire Base Lane, in Arghandab, a 5 or 6 hour drive and one river fording away on a good day.\(^{56}\)

The location of these outposts was set prior to 1-4 Infantry’s arrival, and their location ended up driving the U.S. approach in each of these districts. In Mizan, the eponymous outpost was located in the same village as the district center. In Deh Chopan the outpost, named Baylough after the nearest village, was placed at least half a kilometer away from the nearest village and the district center. Lane, in Arghandab, was quite far—several kilometers downstream—from the original district center in a town called Sayagez. As a result the center could not be protected and was eventually relocated within sight of the U.S. base.\(^{57}\) Each succeeding company from 1-4 Infantry that rotated into Zabul quickly came to the conclusion that they could only realistically expect to control a small radius around each base because of their limited combat power and force protection burdens. This radius roughly coincided with the range of the 120mm mortars that provided their only means of fire support when in trouble, a maximum of around 7 kilometers, although the forces in Arghandab were able to effectively control a slightly larger area due to the larger force structure provided by the Special Forces team and Afghan National Army troops paired with them. This translated into control of what the troops called their “bowls,” or the valley their base occupied, but outside of their 5 to 7 kilometer

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\(^{56}\) Campbell interview.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.
circle situational awareness, intelligence collection, and even the ability to move freely rapidly diminished.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{Deh Chopan: The Insurgency Worsens, 2006-2007}

In 2006 and 2007 the coalition forces took their “disrupt” mission to heart. They conducted a large number of preplanned missions, and frequently pushed into areas outside their “bowls” in operations designed to disrupt the Taliban. For a time their efforts seemed to pay off, for during the first six months after the transition to NATO control, there were no major attacks or improvised explosive devices along Highway 1.\textsuperscript{59} However as the snows melted in spring 2007 the insurgents, perhaps recognizing that a large portion of the coalition forces had been reduced and were not returning any time soon, began to contest the Deh Chopan district more fiercely. Deh Chopan is the second largest district, in population terms, after Shahjoy, with approximately 33,000 residents, according to 2004 UN data. The 35 to 40 U.S. troops, 15 to 20 ANA,\textsuperscript{60} and 15 to 20 ANP officers that typically occupied FOB\textsuperscript{61} Baylough and the district center represent at most a tenth of the needed force ratio for counterinsurgency. Deh Chopan is the most rugged and forbidding of the districts. Troops were by and large unable to use vehicles, and most patrolling was done on foot out of necessity. Patrols that entered passes that left the valley immediately surrounding the base typically encountered resistance so heavy that they could often not even enter the adjacent valley.\textsuperscript{62} Taliban operations frequently targeted the base

\begin{footnotes}
\item[58] The interviewees were unanimous on this point.
\item[59] Campbell interview.
\item[60] ANA troops assigned to Baylough were nominally in platoon strength, around 30 men, but in practice were usually half that number, according to every 1-4 Infantry leader interviewed for this research.
\item[61] Baylough is more appropriately described as a combat outpost, as the term “FOB” is used to describe larger bases with major logistical footprints. However, FOB was used as a catch-all description by the men occupying it at the time, and the name FOB Baylough stuck.
\end{footnotes}
itself. In May 2007 Taliban and foreign fighters operating in Deh Chopan (likely Uzbeks) attacked Baylough every single day for thirty days straight with mortar, rocket, and small arms fire.\textsuperscript{63}

This level of intense fighting continued through June, eased for a short time, then resumed in earnest from the end of August until October. During this time, some of the spikes in SIGACTs reporting can be attributed to large missions conducted by coalition and ANA forces to try and relieve pressure on FOB Baylough, particularly in May/June and September/October of 2007. Resistance to some of these incursions into neighboring valleys was so fierce that several instances U.S. forces were forced to withdraw under fire without even reaching their intended destinations.\textsuperscript{64} The spike in violence cannot be entirely attributed to endogeneity, because the Taliban were openly attempting to drive coalition forces completely out of Deh Chopan. The near-siege conducted in May was followed in early September with an attempt to overrun the tiny (200m x 200m), beleaguered outpost with 150 fighters in a complex pre-dawn assault. During the course of the fighting the ANP lost a mountaintop observation post directly above the outpost, allowing the Taliban to fire on the base from three sides. Only a tenacious defense and several acts of valor prevented the insurgents from breaching the perimeter and possibly even taking the base.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{63} Walker interview.  
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.  
Having established that the 2007 spike in insurgent activity in Deh Chopan was not strictly an endogenous product of larger-scale counterinsurgent operations, the dramatic drop in violence in the following two years must be examined to attempt to provide support for one or more of the competing hypotheses. According to officers interviewed on the subject, the insurgents suffered heavy losses in 2007 and did not attempt to repeat assaults on the outpost at Baylough or the district center in subsequent years. Intelligence reporting and the general impressions of the leaders on the ground over the 2007-2008 period suggested to the TF Zabul leadership that the insurgents elected to largely avoid coalition troops within the “Baylough bowl” and instead orient their efforts towards easier prey.\footnote{Interview with LTC Enrique Wells, deputy commander of Task Force Zabul, October 2007 to July 2008. October 6, 2010.} Deh Chopan is so large and remote that Taliban and foreign fighters in the district could move and live with near impunity by simply
bypassing that single valley and contenting themselves with bottling up the Americans as much as possible in the immediate vicinity around Baylough.

Leaders familiar with the Baylough area also noted a significant lesson learned after the events of 2007. One company from 1-4 Infantry was relieved by another in August 2007, which may explain the lull in fighting that month. The newly arrived platoon at Baylough did not initially patrol as aggressively as their predecessors, in an attempt to avoid prolonged fighting that required the use of airstrikes and the attendant risk to the local population entailed. The enemy responded by resuming attacks on the U.S. base and district center, which prompted the heavy fighting in September and October of that year. The lesson the unit took from this was that the goal of minimizing the impact of fighting on the civilian population takes a careful balance of being aggressive enough to maintain a hold over their 7 kilometer “bubble” but not overly aggressive. 1-4 leaders did not eschew the larger operations to enter and occasionally contest the adjacent valleys, but they did ensure that they were intelligence-driven and went after specific objectives. This is in contrast to the fighting during the 2007 fighting season that saw U.S. and Afghan troops entering contested or insurgent-held areas based on little intelligence, aiming only to “disrupt” the Taliban and attempt to reduce some of the attacks on the U.S. base. Ensuring such actions were taken selectively enabled the unit to strike a balance between keeping the insurgents from becoming firmly established in neighboring areas while granting some breathing room to attempt the governance and development aspects of counterinsurgency based on the district center.

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Mizan and Arghandab Districts: A Steady Success Story?

Figures 11(top) and 12: Mizan district monthly and annual SIGACTs trends.

Mizan, like the other northern districts, was, and still is, largely untouched by coalition and Afghan government forces. Arghandab is a little less remote and is more accessible by ground than Deh Chopan and Kakar, and vehicle operations mean that moving resources and visiting more remote villages is more easily accomplished there than farther to the mountainous
Of the northern districts, Mizan was regarded as one of the more active due to a spike in enemy contact in the latter half of 2006, but that perception changed in succeeding years.⁶⁹

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**Figures 13 (top) and 14: Arghandab district monthly and annual SIGACTs trends.**

So, although the area under relatively firm government and coalition control was still limited to within the roughly 7-kilometer radius of the base, the greater mobility of vehicle-borne forces allowed them to patrol farther from their base. The forces in Mizan and Arghandab were thus able to focus a larger amount of time on establishing relationships with locals as well as development and governance than were those in Deh Chopan in 2007. Among their major

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⁶⁸ Tapper interview.
⁶⁹ Campbell and Walker interviews.
projects were district center improvements, building a school, and distributing tons of winter wheat seed to aid impoverished local farmers. Monthly spikes in SIGACTs such as September 2007 are generally attributable to large scale joint operations by TF Zabul and Special Forces teams or by temporary, targeted insertions of additional troops ordered by RC-South such as a brief operation by a visiting battalion of the British Parachute Regiment in June 2008.

The source of success in Mizan and Arghandab is difficult to divine. It did not result from a local manpower advantage. For most of the 2006-2009 period Arghandab enjoyed a higher number of troops than the other northern districts, with around 60 U.S. personnel and as many as 150 Afghan soldiers, while Mizan had around 40 U.S. and 40 Afghan personnel. However, the Arghandab district population is estimated at 29,000, or slightly more than twice that of Mizan, according to UN data. This means there was still only around 7 counterinsurgents for each 1,000 residents, or one-third to one-quarter of the preferred 20 to 25 per 1,000. The successive leaders of 1-4 Infantry appear to have learned and passed on the same lessons, de-emphasizing their “disrupt” operations, except at the boundaries of their small areas of control and focusing on securing and developing the district center.

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70 Tapper interview.
71 Wells interview.
The districts lining Highway 1 have been the primary focus of RC-South since the NATO assumption of command for Zabul. As a result, they have received the bulk of the attention and resources from all the actors in the province. Qalat, as stated earlier, steadily worsened over time, despite being home to the headquarters of the Afghan government and coalition forces. The other two districts, Shahjoy and Tarnak Wa Jaldak, appear to have been more successful. NATO’s strategy for these districts was to first improve the situation in Qalat, then look east and west to Shahjoy and Tarnak Wa Jaldak. They are two periods of interest in the dataset for the latter districts. First, in Shahjoy, the data suggest a slight decline in enemy activity from 2006 to

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73 Campbell interview.
2007, followed by the otherwise expected steady increase in the subsequent years. Second, in Tarnak Wa Jaldak, activity appears to have remained steady in 2006 and 2007, spiked in 2008, then declined significantly in 2009.

One important factor to consider in assessing these two districts is the nature of ISAF operations along the highway. Whereas the U.S. elements in the northern districts operated in a greatly decentralized manner, the Romanian elements of Task Force Zabul did not. The vast majority of the Romanians lived and operated day to day out of FOB Lagman on the outskirts of Qalat city, spending comparatively little time in the districts outside of Qalat. They gradually began decentralizing in 2008 and 2009, with positive results.

Figures 16 and 17: Shahjoy and Tarnak Wa Jaldak annual SIGACTs trends.
Shahjoy:

Although the SIGACTs reporting for the province’s most populous district (49,000)\textsuperscript{74} seems to indicate a generally stable, and perhaps even improving, security situation between 2006 and 2008, the numbers may be deceptive. According to U.S. leaders, the district actually steadily worsened, and attacks along the highway increased over this period.\textsuperscript{75} SIGACTs reporting may be artificially low, given the reduction of U.S. forces in 2006.

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\textsuperscript{74} The UN population numbers are more likely to be accurate for highway districts due to their accessibility and more concentrated dwellings.

\textsuperscript{75} Based on Walker, Campbell, and Wells interviews, covering the 2006-2008 period.
When RC-South transitioned to NATO responsibility, the district was given over to an ANA kandak, with around 250 troops, as the primary security force, backed by 60 to 100 National Police. The Romanian battalion responsible for highway security was also patrolled Shahjoy, but did so from their central base in Qalat. Romanian troops did not begin maintaining a permanent presence in Shahjoy until a platoon-sized element, perhaps 30 troops in armored vehicles, were positioned there in 2007. This number expanded to a full company, around 100 troops, in early 2009. Reporting by Afghan units, especially police forces, is uneven, and may explain the drop, while the increase in force levels starting in 2007 could possibly result explain the increased in reported activity from that point forward. U.S. officers familiar with the area over this period attribute the increase in violence to greater insurgent activity instead of a larger Romanian presence, noting that the Taliban typically ignored coalition forces to focus on easier targets like the police. The increase in SIGACTs in Shahjoy is not entirely endogenous, and represents a deliberate shift in insurgent priorities from 2006/2007, as they came to regard Highway 1 as an important source of both revenue from illegal checkpoints and kidnappings, and as a strategic choke point. Unlike the remote hinterlands, attacks along the accessible highway were highly visible, making them useful for propaganda and spreading a general feeling of insecurity. One must conclude that SIGACTs reporting for 2006-2007 is slightly misleading, and that the slow yet steady deterioration over three years does not qualify as a successful case of economy of force counterinsurgency.

76 Wells and Saunders interviews.
77 Walker, Wells, Saunders, and Allen interviews.
Tarnak Wa Jaldak

Figure 19: Tarnak Wa Jaldak district monthly SIGACTs trends.

Tarnak Wa Jaldak is an unusual case in Zabul province. Unlike the other two highway districts, it is home to a relatively small population, 14,000 people, and had no permanently stationed coalition or Afghan National Army troops from 2006 through 2008. For the first two years of this study its only forces were approximately 250 members of the Afghan National Police. At the opening of “fighting season” in 2009, ISAF established FOB Mescall, placing an entire Romanian company, at least 100 men, in the district. This means that by 2009, the local force to population ratio (again based on 2004 UN data) actually reached 24 per 1,000 residents.

Achieving FM 3-24’s general force prescriptions does not adequately explain the apparent success achieved in the dramatic drop in SIGACTs reporting from 2008 to 2009. Further investigation reveals major changes that influenced the outcome, specifically, retraining the police force and pairing them with U.S. trainers and “enablers.” SIGACTs data for the

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78 Named for MAJ Brian Mescall from 1-4 Infantry, the deputy commander, TF Zabul from July 2008 until January 2009. He was killed in action by an improvised explosive device along with two other 1-4 soldiers while reconnoitering the future location of the base that now bears his name.
district in 2006 and 2007 are misleading. The ANP officers were generally ineffective. They were untrained, under-equipped, and virtually unpaid, often resorting to illegally charging tolls to traffic on Highway 1 just to subsist. These officers rarely, if ever, patrolled and mostly stayed inside their roadside checkpoints or police stations. In 2007 the ANP in Zabul began rotating through an eight-week train and equip program in Kandahar as part of a larger plan to begin reforming the chronically underperforming and previously neglected police forces across the country. Part of this plan was to introduce embedded trainers, known as Police Mentoring Teams (PMTs) that would perform similar training and liaison functions as their long-established counterparts with the Afghan National Army. PMTs were established in Zabul’s three highway districts, and the policemen in those districts showed immediate improvement.

The newly retrained police and their embedded U.S. mentoring team were reintroduced to Tarnak Wa Jaldak in January 2008. Up to that point, enemy activity along the highway had largely amounted to banditry. Bands of armed men would shoot and burn truck traffic, establish illegal checkpoints, and committing robbery. As the new PMT-led operations resumed these actions were no longer simply ignored—they began to be vigorously pursued. As operations got into full swing in March 2008 SIGACTs reporting surges, but the nature of violence in the province had changed. The insurgents now found themselves opposed and frequently pursued long distances away from the highway by the ANP. Police forces began spending most of their time away from their isolated stations and out in their district, so that although the level of violence spiked as they began confronting the insurgents, they also began forging more

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80 Wells interview.
significant links with the local population. As a result, more intelligence on insurgent activity began coming their way as relations with residents improved, leading to further action against the insurgents.\textsuperscript{81}

The deceptively low levels of SIGACTs in 2006 and 2007 were matched by what should be viewed as a “correction” in 2008 as the forces became more effective. In May 2009 TF Zabul gained an attached aviation unit that placed attack helicopters in the province for the first time. U.S. forces began pairing Apache helicopters to teams of 20 to 40 ANP along the highway, with deadly effect. These became the most effective, deadliest forces on the ground leading up to the insertion of new U.S. forces later in the year.\textsuperscript{82}

The lessons of Tarnak Wa Jaldak are clear. Effective policing and counterinsurgency is not possible without at least minimally trained and led forces. Once forces in Tarnak received a baseline of training and effective leadership they began establishing the local relationship building and aggressive patrolling that set the stage for the expansion of forces in the district in 2009, all without relying on heavy forces or large numbers of airstrikes. Once the expanded forces arrived, the district was no longer an economy of force effort. With a 24 to 1,000 force ratio the level of violence diminished and Tarnak Wa Jaldak was rated by one U.S. officer as “hands down, the biggest success of my deployment.”\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{81} Kelly interview.
\textsuperscript{82} Saunders interview.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
Evaluating Zabul’s experience as an economy of force operation simply through the lens of a few select districts does not fully capture some of its wider trends and their implications. In order to understand why violence increased along some districts and not others, the impact of Zabul’s counterinsurgent structure and division of labor is important to understand. Investigation into province-wide trends and interactions between and among the various organizations operating within Zabul provides some insight into the effectiveness of Task Force Zabul and its partners.

**Unity of Command**

The bulk of coalition forces during the 2006-2009 period were from the Romanian army. A Romanian colonel was nominally in charge of TF Zabul but possessed only “coordinating” authority (with no ability to compel action) over the other actors in the province, such as the Provincial Reconstruction Team, Special Forces teams, and embedded trainers accompanying Afghan soldiers and police.\(^84\) RC-South, as a multinational effort, suffered from a similar dysfunction over contributing nations. This effectively divorced the support and decision-making functions of the security line of operation from those of the development and governance side. Thus, like many multinational efforts, personal relationships, voluntary cooperation, and compromise were the most important factors in achieving province-wide objectives.\(^85\) This is inefficient in a fully resourced COIN operation. In a poorly resourced economy of force situation it could be dangerous. The restructuring of Task Force Zabul in late 2008 helped solve

\(^84\) Wells interview.  
\(^85\) Campbell, Wells, Walker, and Saunders are unanimous on this point.
some of these issues, but such a fragmented, ad hoc organization should not have been contemplated in the first place. This is not a new concept for the U.S. military, but it is lesson that future NATO-led operations should also learn. True unity of command and unity of effort cannot be achieved in tactical-level multinational operations if national pride, personality conflicts, or severe differences in military capability between countries exist.

**Development and Governance**

The Provincial Reconstruction Team was the primary actor for the non-security aspects of COIN during the period under review. For logistics reasons as much as anything else, most of their efforts were focused along Highway 1. Their impact is difficult to assess without broad survey data, but the servicemembers interviewed for this study generally agree that they were effective in what limited projects they could pursue in such an unstable security environment. Although, as stated before, the net effect of these projects is difficult assess, some individual efforts were cited by officers interviewed for this study. Of particular importance was the provision of winter wheat seed by the USAID representative. By improving crop yields and not simply giving out handouts, the counterinsurgents in Zabul were able to show the tangible benefits of cooperation and empower local farmers at the same time. Because much of Zabul relies on subsistence farming, increased yields also helped avoid a repeat of the late 2007 shock in global food prices that threatened starvation in some of the province’s most remote areas. 86

**Coalition Partner Effectiveness**

Capability differences between Romanian and other NATO forces led to their confinement to the highway districts. This left the least-capable coalition forces in charge of the

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86 Allen interview.
districts on which RC-South placed the highest priority. Romanian forces spent most of their
time “just driving around” Highway 1, and were poorly equipped for counterinsurgency.
Language issues between Romanians and their small complement of English-speaking
interpreters (Romanian to English, English to Pashto) limited their ability to interact with the
populace, in addition to the lack of counterinsurgency training Romanian forces received up to
2008.\textsuperscript{87}

    Romanian operational preferences limited their effectiveness as counterinsurgents in a
number of ways, especially in 2006 and 2007. The consistently refused to conduct operations in
less than platoon strength, and rarely, if ever, got out of their vehicles. They also remained
highly centralized, both in terms of leadership and disposition. Like most militaries in the
former Warsaw Pact, Romania is struggling to overcome its hesitation to empower junior
leaders.\textsuperscript{88} This stifles initiative and slows reaction times. The spread of Romanian forces to
satellite bases in Shahjoy, Qalat, and Tarnak Wa Jaldak is encouraging, but the forces in these
places usually operated on a rotational basis, returning to FOB Lagman in Qalat when their turn
was up. This limited their ability to get to know their environment, the local people, and develop
the relationships and intelligence gathering necessary to find and combat insurgents.\textsuperscript{89}

    The good news is that the long-term relationship between the Germany-based troops of 1-4
Infantry and the Romanian army developed into an institutionalized training partnership. As
part of their pre-deployment training, troops from both countries would travel to training centers
in Romania and to 1-4’s home station, the Joint Multinational Readiness Center. As this

\textsuperscript{87} Wells interview.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
relationship developed, Romanian operational capacity improved, increasing their effectiveness.\(^{90}\) COIN requires close partnerships in order to be successful, and the U.S. military would do well not to discard the training model developed by 1-4 and the Romanian army once their deployment ends.

\(^{90}\) Wells and Saunders interviews.
SECTION III: HYPOTHESIS SUPPORT AND IMPLICATIONS

The data analysis and investigation into districts of Zabul province that experienced a decline in violence have revealed that U.S. infantry units learned over time and passed on an approach designed to minimize the negative impacts of combat on areas outside their operational grasp, while maximizing their impact on the small areas they controlled. This effort was designed to manage expectations to prepare their areas for a future expansion of Afghan government authority. The Romanian units, by contrast, did not initially train or prepare for counterinsurgency, and did a poor job of passing along lessons learned, although they improved over time. While unit performance may explain some decreased violence, the findings of this thesis reveal that such declines are often localized, and are not necessarily indicative of broader success. In keeping with this, several of our possible hypotheses are supported by the evidence this research has produced.

HYPOTHESIS ASSESSMENT

After fleshing out the details of each case of declining SIGACTs reporting, it is now possible to assess the relative merits of each of our six possible explanations.

- **H1: Counterinsurgent forces used battlefield innovation and institutional memory to adopt practices resulting in a local defeat of the insurgency.**

  The experience in the northern districts lends support to this explanation. The rotating infantry companies from the U.S. Army’s 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry built up a set of institutional knowledge almost by default. Better trained and equipped than their Romanian counterparts, they appear to have presented enough of a challenge to the insurgents—within their limited zone of operations surrounding the district centers—to prevent the growth of the insurgency in
localized areas. However, the localized nature of their success limits the utility of this explanation and lends an equal degree of support for H6.

- **H2: Decline in reported insurgent activity is a result of counterinsurgent forces avoiding engagement or limiting operations.**

  In the northern districts, support for this explanation is limited. Less aggressive patrols by U.S. and Afghan troops in Deh Chopan in the late summer and early fall of 2007 may have actually encouraged increased activity by the insurgents, because they were less likely to encounter U.S. patrols, and thus faced less risk when moving and operating near the district center. On the other hand, the operational limitations imposed on the Romanian forces by their capabilities (language barriers and logistics capacity) and preferences (conducting road-bound patrols in platoon strength) almost certainly resulted in less contact with insurgents than might otherwise have been the case.

- **H3: Reporting on insurgent activity decreases without a change in actual incident numbers, e.g. because insurgents target Afghan forces or civilians instead of coalition forces.**

  This hypothesis finds support in the insurgency’s actions along the highway districts. The case of Tarnak Wa Jaldak’s deceptively low incident reporting in 2006 and 2007 is a good example of an active Taliban presence going underreported by the Afghan National Police. This explanation is also valid in parts of districts with a permanent U.S. presence, such as Deh Chopan. Vast areas—the majority of the district’s total area, in fact—remain unmonitored by coalition forces by virtue of the highly restrictive terrain, enemy activity, and sheer isolation of
successive mountain valleys. This makes action by insurgents in these unwatched areas impossible to discount.

- **H4: Insurgent activity decreases because insurgents have reconciled with local leaders or the government.**

  There is little support for this hypothesis in Zabul Province. Military personnel interviewed for this study had frequent interaction with many local leaders and government representatives, and collaborated closely with them. No serious attempts at accommodation or reconciliation were reported. However, this is impossible to rule out for tribal leaders in areas outside of government or coalition influence.

- **H5: Insurgent activity is reduced due to tribal structures and leaders exerting greater control.**

  Again, military personnel interviews and international media have reported no such instances in Zabul. However, these sources can only be viewed as authoritative in areas where coalition and Afghan government officials had frequent interaction with local leaders. No information is available on areas that remained outside of this subset, such as those in Kakar. Therefore, it is impossible to rule out that ethnic and tribal affinity may have influenced insurgents to defer to the wishes of local leaders in areas without coalition or Afghan government presence.

- **H6: Insurgents have shifted operations across district, provincial, or international borders.**

  Borders in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan have never meant very much, and district boundaries within Zabul are no exception. Following the heavy fighting in 2007, the insurgents in the northern districts often simply avoided the U.S. forces and focused more time
and energy on Highway 1. There is also reason to believe they attempted to exploit boundaries between coalition forces, in particular using the border with Kandahar province in the Mizan district.91

After this assessment, this study concludes that the case of Zabul province lends the most support for H1, H3, and H6. Counterinsurgent adaptation, changes in insurgent targeting choices, and insurgent relocation were all strongly or moderately supported by the evidence. H2, a decline in reported violence due to counterinsurgent avoidance, has moderate explanatory power. It is best supported by the strong levels of endogeneity present in SIGACTs reporting. Meanwhile, H4 and H5 have the most limited support. While there is little evidence reported that would indicate insurgent reconciliation or obedience to local tribal leaders could explain reductions in reported violence, the vast areas with no coalition or government presence, and thus, no information, make these two explanations impossible to fully assess.

The limitations of the data used in this study make it necessary to conclude this assessment with a final caveat. SIGACTs reporting is a limited tool, and has inherent problems as a measure of an insurgency. The inability to account comprehensively for factors outside of its violence-focused scope, along with the problem of endogeneity in reporting incidents, means that the above conclusions derive from a set of cases that were selected and examined based in large part on this flawed means. The qualitative aspects of this investigation should mitigate this problem to some degree, but it would be irresponsible not to mention the reduction in confidence in this thesis’ conclusions that is an unavoidable result of the present data limitations.

91 Allen interview.
IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The lessons of Zabul province’s experience with economy of force counterinsurgency from 2006 to 2009 yield four important factors for consideration, subject to the data-driven constraints of this analysis as discussed throughout. Due to the methodological uncertainties involved in this thesis, which derive from the limits on case selection and analysis based on SIGACTs reporting, these recommendations should not be viewed as ironclad. While they do find support in this study, to be viewed as authoritative these recommendations require further study based on more abundant and reliable data than was available for this research.

First, when an area is designated as an economy of force environment, troop quality becomes more, not less, important. When manpower is at a premium, consider using more capable troops in economy of force roles. Romanian contributions to ISAF efforts have been admirable, and they have shown a great deal of improvement. However, in austere and hostile environments like Zabul, supporting a coalition partner that cannot meet its own transportation and supply needs is a burden for smaller U.S. units. Troops in an economy of force must be able to operate in a decentralized manner, which expands the logistical lines of communication within a unit. With a tiny force already required by necessity to use nearly a third of its combat power protecting its own outposts, any further drain on man hours reduces the time those troops could be spending in their sectors performing the real work of counterinsurgency. The Romanians are man-for-man less effective than their U.S. counterparts by virtue of training and equipment, as their inability to operate below the platoon level would seem to indicate. The smaller U.S. contingent of Task Force Zabul had an outsized effect on their districts compared to the Romanian troops. Deploying logistically dysfunctional troops in a place where every squad of
troops is precious compounds the existing logistical inefficiencies. The U.S. has a hard enough time addressing the deficiencies of the Afghan troops—it should consider this when it chooses to bring in additional foreign forces if they have limited capabilities. NATO should (and must) welcome the contributions of such partners so that the effort is not viewed as an American occupation, but they are best placed in locations where economies of scale in transport and support functions already exist and the negative consequences of their logistical burden can be more easily absorbed.

Second, the counterinsurgents in an economy of force should consider the benefits of leaving select areas ungoverned. This may seem counterintuitive to the broader strategic goals of a counterinsurgency campaign, but an economy of force situation is a shaping effort as part of a larger campaign. In places like Zabul the government and its representatives are not yet capable of fairly or effectively administering an entire province. Limiting their writ temporarily serves both military necessity and political expediency. Conferring benefits on a limited portion of the province can prime the rest of the population to be positively inclined to an expanded role for the central government. This also prods insurgents with claims on governance such as the Taliban’s shadow government to go ahead and make the attempt. Limiting military intervention into areas the counterinsurgents cannot hold helps control resentment caused by inconclusive fighting.

This approach has its risks. It could backfire if the Taliban or other insurgents are spectacular, popular rulers and administrators. Of course, if this is the case the counterinsurgents should re-evaluate their cause. Such areas should not become safe havens for insurgents. Special operations missions and selected incursions by coalition and Afghan conventional forces
must still occur, but must be intelligence-driven and must be accompanied by consequence management efforts like medical assistance clinics and aid distribution.

Third, when resources are scarce, training the worst of the local forces, especially the police, and pairing them with enablers can be effective. The police forces in Tarnak Wa Jaldak are a good example of this. Training and oversight of government security personnel should be targeted at the least capable and most-ignored echelons first in an economy of force. The Afghan National Army in Zabul had embedded U.S. mentors and a U.S.-run training system for years leading up to 2006. They became more proficient over the 2006 to 2009 period, but not dramatically so. Improving the ANA is important, but the immediate return on investment when the police began receiving such attention in 2007-2008 is instructive. The payoff in 2009 was that the police, rather than the army, achieved the most along Highway 1 once paired with attack helicopters, while the ANA was more of a holding force.\(^9\)

The final implication of this research has to do with the scope of operations. By definition, any units in an economy of force role are part of a secondary, or “shaping” effort. This means that their objectives are supposed to operate as part of a larger design, creating the conditions that will enable success in ongoing or future operations. With this in mind, the localized nature of any “successes” in an economy of force at the district or provincial level should not be allowed to simply create problems elsewhere. Choosing where to place the best troops, such as locating the U.S. troops in the northern districts of this case study, will have consequences for the adjoining areas, as seen when insurgent efforts increased around Zabul’s highway districts. In this case, insurgents began avoiding the more effective troops and put more effort into other

\(^9\) Saunders interview.
areas, perhaps even outside of the province. Driving the enemy to avoid or abandon a relatively worthless, sparsely populated district is a local success that could easily become a broader failure if the enemy simply moves and destabilizes a different district or province that is much more valuable. Choosing where to place troops in these situations is therefore very tricky. Effective tactical success requires a long term presence and focus on a smaller area of effective control. This might be directly contradicted by the need to move troops if the enemy changes its own area of focus to one more highly valued. This argues for a prioritization of locations for receiving the best troops based on importance rather than difficulty. While this might reduce instances of local success, it also goes further to support the broader goals of the larger COIN effort. The implication of this for Zabul is that using the U.S. platoons in the more remote northern districts simply because they were the only ones able to effectively support themselves may have been counterproductive for RC-South in the long run.
CONCLUSIONS

The findings produced here are not groundbreaking. Much of what is recommended is derived directly from current doctrine and theory. What this study provides is evidence of what works in an economy of force, and what does not. “Success” for an individual district does not necessarily translate into success for the province. Even in the cases qualified as successful in this study, there is no clear measure of winning or losing. What the units in question accomplished is more aptly described as managing a complex set of variables to achieve a better-than-expected outcome. What does not work is perhaps more clear. Mechanized foreign forces that rumble up and down the highway but do not involve themselves locally become cannot develop the intelligence required to drive effective COIN missions. Fighting pitched battles in far-flung mountain redoubts of the enemy may kill him or force him to move temporarily, but they do not prepare an area for eventual control by the government. Counterinsurgents are often their own worst enemy, alienating the population and creating more insurgents. This study proposes that we consider allowing our opponents to make the same mistakes in the ungoverned spaces of places like Afghanistan.

Doctrine requires an economy of force to devote minimal combat power to secondary efforts. It says nothing about the quality of that combat power. Fewer, better trained and led troops could accomplish as much as many more from a coalition partner that is still emerging from its former-Soviet military model. However, the pre-deployment training relationship created by U.S. and Romanian forces in Europe is a useful lesson that should be preserved for future operations that might require a rapid improvement in a NATO partner.
Zabul province has its limits as a case study. It featured an established, flourishing insurgency, multinational partners with a complex command and support structure, a rural population with ethnic and tribal links to the insurgency, and sometimes staggeringly difficult terrain. Cross-case comparisons should be approached with caution. However, this work does establish the aims and efforts produced over more than three years of sometimes heartbreaking, frustrating effort by troops in Zabul. The district center security plan, “do no harm,” and “grass is greener” approaches merit further study, especially in the form of population surveys in areas after they are brought under initial government control to provide evidence on the effectiveness of this technique. Accomplishing this task requires formal recognition of the gap in addressing economy of force counterinsurgency by writers of U.S. military doctrine and prominent theorists, and devoting the resources required, especially future planning for data collection and analysis, to implement a systematic effort to close it.
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