



THE NEED TO REFOCUS AFGHAN METRICS AND NARRATIVES ON KEY LOCAL AREAS AND POPULATION CENTERS

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Recent command briefs have highlighted the fact that the implementation of the new strategy in Afghanistan is focused on key population centers. In broad terms, the campaign map in Figure One shows that this involves very different groups of such centers:

- The Helmand River Valley
- The greater Kandahar area
- The key population centers of RC East, and
- A wide mix of population areas in the north, center, and west.

Each of the populated areas involves different mixes of threats, local power structures, and populations. Each involves sub-clusters with different sets of priorities in terms of *shape*, *clear*, *hold*, and *build*. Kandahar is still in the *shape* phase. In some areas, like Marjah, operations are still in the clear mode. In other parts of Helmand and RC East, operations are completing *clear*, and are entering or are already in the *hold* and *build* phases.

In much of the rest of the country, there are mixtures of relatively stable and secure areas in the *hold* and *build* phases mixed with areas of operations in the *clear* and *hold* phases and areas where the insurgents still exploit a near power vacuum.

What all of these areas have in common is that progress in the war is not measured in national, provincial, or district terms. It is measured in terms of specific local conditions in specific population centers. The war will be won or lost in these terms and narratives and metrics that ignore these facts do not provide anything approaching an adequate measure of what is happening. **Figure Two** illustrates this for Helmand. **Figure Three** illustrates it for Kandahar.

Rethinking Priorities for Metrics and Narratives

This raises serious questions about the merits of much of the current effort to develop metrics and narratives that report on the war and the progress of the new strategy. It is useful to have a broad set of measures at the national level, but this is not where the war will be fought, or how either military or civil operations should be judged. Counterinsurgency is inherently local, and this is particularly true in a country with as many tribal, ethnic, sectarian, and geographic divisions as Afghanistan – *and Pakistan*.

The priority for both classified and unclassified reporting should be to clearly show what is happening in each key population area in net assessment terms. It should be to integrate assessment of the threat with assessment of the impact of US, ISAF, and GIRoA actions. It should be possible to see the trends in kinetics tied to the effectiveness of the ANSF, GIRoA, and outside military and aid efforts. Moreover, these net assessments should be tailored to the specific conditions in given areas, rather than to some standard model.

Once again, nation-wide metrics and narratives are not without value, but they are perhaps the least important aspect of reporting and analysis. In fact, in many cases they will disguise far more than they reveal unless they set the context for far more detailed analysis in key populated areas.

Moreover, they cannot support effective management of the war or command and control. One of the key lessons of Vietnam, and experience to date in Iraq and Afghanistan, is that decision making needs to focus on effective management of civil-military operations *at the local level*. Reporting upward through a steady process of aggregation and integration of the data – and efforts to create nationwide overviews as a command and planning tool – is inherently inaccurate. It becomes impossible to know if and is not working in key areas, and to manage at the level where the war needs to be fought.

Assessing by Key Area of Operations

The kind of US and ISAF analysis reflected in Figures One through Four already illustrates the areas that should be the focus of most metrics and narratives. These areas are critical. Nationwide assessments and aggregated assessment of key districts are not. Population-centric operations do not have boundaries that coincide with national aggregates, or provincial and district boundaries.

Given areas will involve different mixes of civil-military progress and problems. Tribal, ethnic, and sectarian differences are area-specific. Insurgent operations and activity levels differ in critical ways. US and allied operations differ at both the civil and military levels. Neither the CM or CUAT rating systems provide a meaningful picture of the effectiveness of elements of the ANSF in given areas in either military or civil operations. Furthermore, the new CUAT system uses the same metrics for both the ANA and ANP, ignoring the vastly different problems and environments the two forces face. District assessments do not describe the impact of central or provincial Afghan governance on civil or security operations. The role of ISAF and aid efforts in shaping the outcome of *clear, shape, hold, build*, and preparing for *transition* is always going to differ by key populated area, as is the relative progress in each of these areas of activity.

Moreover, it is absolutely critical that assessments be integrated at the civil-military level, and metrics be tied together with area-specific narratives, rather than reported upwards in compartmented forms. If there is any one lesson from operations in Afghanistan to date, it is that no individual element of the US or ISAF effort should be allowed to report upwards in compartmented or stovepiped form. Unless integration is forced on all those concerned from the bottom up, and focused on success or failure by key area, “integrated civil-military operations” will remain an unfocused, pro forma myth.

Providing the Necessary Analysis

General Flynn has already addressed some of these needs in his work on reforming intelligence. The ISAF analyses reflected in **Figures One through Three** reflect such a focus. So – although the brief is overly focused on the “village” -- does the USAID Office of Military Affairs Stabilization and District Stability Framework (DSF). The goal should now be to tie these together into functional net assessments tailored to the specific realities in specific population areas.

- Military operations need to show not only that the insurgency no longer is actively present and capable of operations, but the degree to which shadow networks and stay-behinds, infiltrators and local cells are active or truly cleared.
- This requires metrics and narratives that move beyond major incidents and conventional casualty estimates, and describe the lower levels of violence and patterns of intimidation that dominate counterinsurgency in “cleared” areas – patterns that can reemerge for year after an area is supposed cleared and in the hold phase.
- The networks, rat lines, and concentrations of insurgent factions need to be reported in ways clearly tied to their location and operations near given population centers and clusters.
- GIRA’s effectiveness and integrity at the national, provincial, and district levels needs to be measured and improved by key population center; and the role of powerbrokers and criminals assessed in such terms.
- The effectiveness of the ANA and ANCOP needs to be measured and improved by local area; loyalties need to be assessed in such terms, and the relative strength of ANSF, militias, and threat forces needs to be assessed in local terms. The CUAT needs to be expanded or reformed to contribute to this type of analysis.
- The role of each element of the ANP, the adequacy of the formal and informal justice system, and the presence of some working form of prompt justice needs similar combined analysis. Again, the CUAT needs to be either completely re-worked or replaced in order to contribute to this.
- The overall impact of aid and civil-military operations by all relevant aid workers, PRTs, and related military efforts also should be assessed in such terms.
- Efforts to measure Afghan perceptions and public opinion need to be tailored to operational needs in well-defined areas and deal with local requirements. National estimates of “hearts and minds” have some value, but they are no substitute for the kind of operational awareness that provide useful guidance in shaping operations and measuring their effectiveness.

We do not need more models and studies conducted from the outside that seek some standard approach. We need to devote fewer – not more – resources to nation-wide assessments. In fact, the ability of the given commander and his or her civilian counterpart at every level in every key area to create analysis and reporting that effectively describes what is happening in their area is the key to understanding the war, to learning what works and what fails, and to prioritizing follow-on action.

Laying the Groundwork for Honesty, Credibility, and Strategic Patience

Moreover, this kind of analysis is the only credible basis for building the level of transparency and trust that is needed. The US must show that enough of the elements of the strategy are working in enough areas to win the kind of strategic patience needed from the Congress, the American public, and those allied counterparts that can still be persuaded. It is key to providing the Afghan people with a credible picture that success is possible in their area and eventually on a national level.

Figure Four is a warning about the danger of “spin” and the relentless tendency to report good news up the chain of command and in public reporting. Figure Four shows how the honest estimates of the situation in Helmand in Figure Two compare with a totally dishonest exercise in “spin” in an earlier metric. Put in context, the kind of reporting in Figure Two in June 2010 has credibility, portrays the level of success Marjah honestly, shows there has been very real progress in other parts of Helmand, and makes the case for the strategic patience necessary to determine whether the new strategy can win.

In contrast, the kind of grossly unrealistic exaggeration of success in Helmand shown in the colors on the map for May 2010 (showing Khan Neshin and Garmser and as “green” in July 2009) symbolizes the kind of reporting that turned real tactical progress in Marjah into the perception of failure, and cast doubt on the credibility of US and ISAF reporting and the integrity of the entire war effort. Like “government in a box,” we do not need an enemy if our concept of analysis and communications is to lose trust and credibility.

If we are to have useful and honest metrics and analysis, and build the trust we need, we need to remember where we really are after more than eight years of war. Regardless of political pressure, there are no quick answers to compensating for eight years of neglecting and underresourcing the war.

We will not have a clear picture of how to best implement many aspects of the new strategy, of how well our effort to implement will work, until the end of the 2011 campaign season -- to the extent seasons still exist. At the same time, many of the current criticisms of the war effort are the result of the fact that the US has often set goals in political or bureaucratic time that it will take a year or more longer to achieve in real time.

By real world – rather than political -- standards, there are many major areas of progress since the summer of last year:

- A clear recognition of the seriousness of the war, and that it must be won on a population-centric, rather than kinetic level.
- A viable approach to strategy that can deal with the realities of this war, and is flexible and adaptive enough to adjust to the insurgent response.
- A growing operational understanding that the goals for Afghan development have been fundamentally unrealistic in timing and scope, and acceptance of a much more limited and practical endstate based on Afghan priorities and perceptions and key needs for security and

stability. Still far from realistic management of goals and expectations, but moving towards acceptance of the fact that we must plan for "Afghan good enough" and not "Afghan unachievable."

- A fundamental reorganization of the intelligence effort to provide far more honest reporting, better metrics and judgments, and the kind of "net assessment" and civil-military approach necessary to understand what is happening and support a meaningful campaign. This is supported by considerably more realistic strategic assessment. Still a long way to go in getting it right -- perhaps a year more -- but still major progress.
- Build up of a US force large enough to deal with the most critical threats, and a de facto recognition that -- as was the case in Iraq -- the US must lead to win, rather than hope for allied efforts that will not come.
- Deployment of US forces on the basis of overall strategic priorities, rather than by zone of operations. Real partnership with the British, and an understanding that we must either play a role in the center and north, rather than rely on our allies, or see continued insurgent gains.
- Progress in providing civilian assets in the field. Badly short of what is needed, but at least the core of the effort required.
- Shifts in aid and civil/governance efforts that give priority to key security and stability needs, and lay the ground work for building up more effective governance and economic progress at the key district and population center level.
- Growing understanding that we are the main source of today's unacceptable level of Afghan corruption and wealthy power brokers, and steadily improving efforts to control the flow of aid and contract money, limit it to the Afghans who use it properly, and focus on the effectiveness of our efforts rather than the size and rate of spending. Probably a year away from broad effectiveness and two years away from the level of control that is really needed, but still some significant progress.
- A first real effort to adequately resource and organize the ANSF development effort. Still serious problems, but solvable over time and already making real progress at the ANA level.
- Acceptance of the need to create Afghan forces and structure of local governance that are made real partners, and of the need for successful transition, and sensitivity to Afghan casualties and perception of ISAF operations and tactics.
- A growing understanding that the US country effort must be a truly integrated civil-military effort, or we will lose the war. At least some progress in reorganizing the US country team both in Kabul and the field. Again, a year or so from the effort we need, but real progress.
- Some matching progress on the part of our allies, and in restructuring the ISAF/PRT effort in the field.
- Serious efforts in the field to go from a conceptual approach to shape-clear-hold-build to actual operations in Helmand, and the beginning of operations in Kandahar. A new degree of coherence in similar efforts in RC East. All still experimental and uncertain -- particularly in the ability to sustain progress over time -- but this is inevitable given the limited level of effort when the new strategy was put in place.
- Real, if still very imperfect, progress in making Pakistan a meaningful partner in the war.

- Deployment of enough UCAV-SOF-intel assets to pose a continuing threat to insurgent networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. More effective use of "counterterrorism" tools as well as counterinsurgency tools.
- Changes in counternarcotics to move away from the kind of broad eradication that effectively drove narcotics into the control of the Taliban to a focus on higher level traffickers and networks and key areas of insurgent control.
- A serious effort to find a working balance between the real world limits imposed by the Karzai and Pakistani governments, and finding the practical work-arounds to these limits. An extremely uncertain process, and still some impossible efforts to transform Afghan and Pakistani power structure, but still much better with less pointless confrontations.
- Sufficient progress in the counter-IED effort to prevent it from being the Taliban's equivalent of the Stinger.
- At least some understanding that the primary problem the US faces in strategic communications is to build transparency, credibility, and trust in the US public, Congress, and media and to do so in ways that have lasting credibility and impact, rather than spinning the war in ways that build ignorance and mistrust.

None of us know whether this progress will be sufficient to win, or whether "victory" in the form of an end state that creates enough stability and security in Afghanistan and Pakistan for the US and its allies to leave will have enduring grand strategic effects. Iraq is already a warning that strategic victory does not bring any guarantee of grand strategic success. South Korea exemplifies the fact that such success is possible. Vietnam exemplifies the fact that a war that seemed to meet every test of success can end in failure.

What is clear, however, is that for at least the next two years, the war will be won or lost by success at the local level in key populated areas in both civil and military terms. It is equally clear that success will almost certainly not be consistent, and that tactical success will often outpace political and civil success. We are already at the limits of US and allied strategic patience if we continue to communicate in terms that set unrealistic expectations, misrepresent success and enduring challenges, and push the timescale of operations, ANSF development, and civil programs to the point where they fail. The war will be lost if we do not develop an honest understanding of our progress. Vietnam is tragic example of a war where far too often the chain of reporting spun up success that did not actually exist. It is also a warning that public trust is won by having an honest message rather than by trying to filter and control the truth.

Figure One: Key Population Centers in the Current Campaign Plan

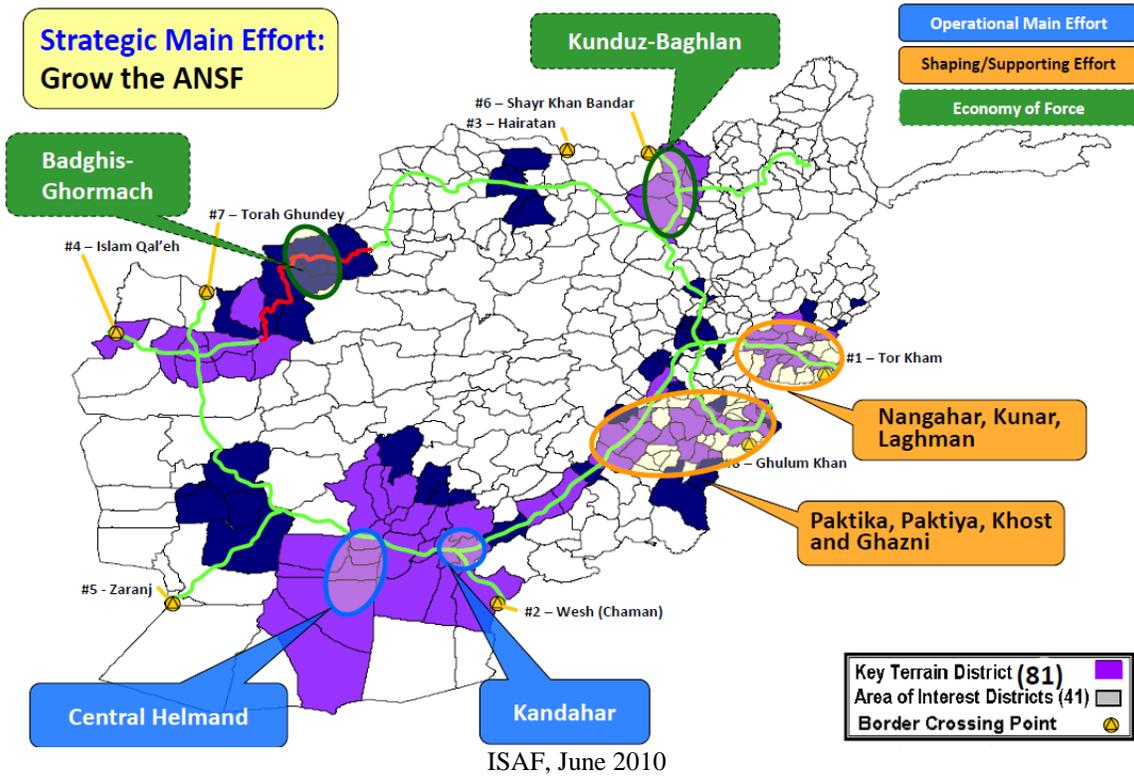


Figure Two: Key Population Clusters in Helmand

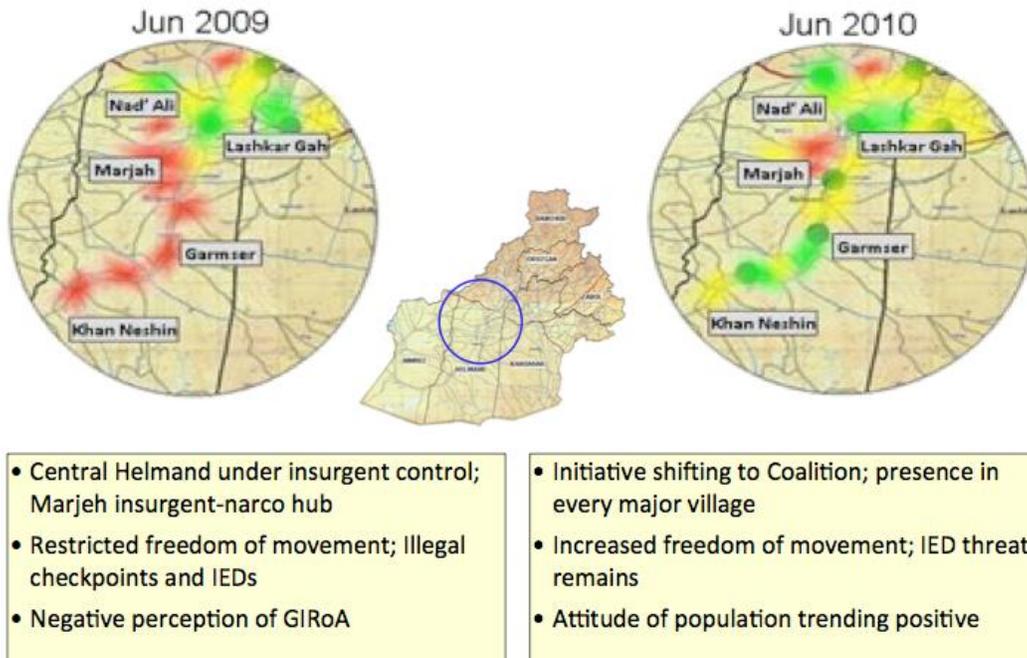
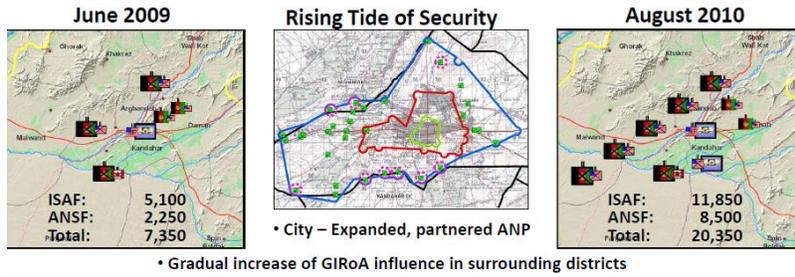


Figure Three: Key Population Factors in Kandahar



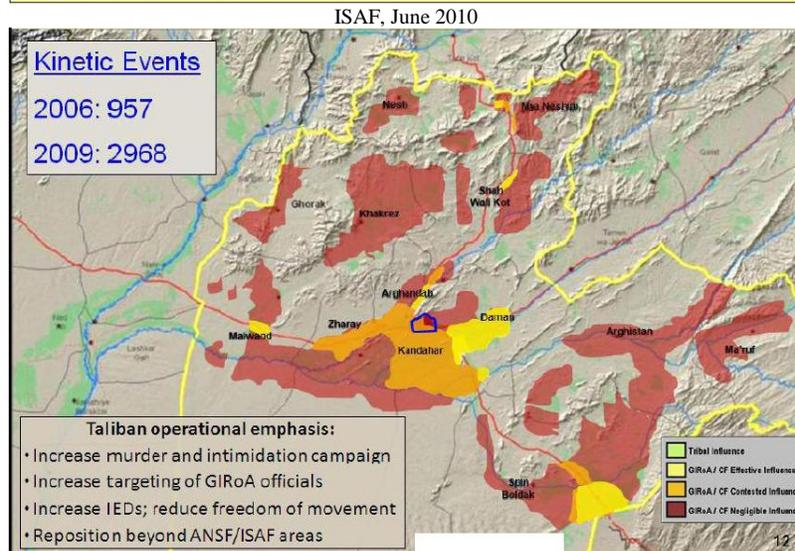
Political Reform

- Manage relationships: Powerbrokers and Political elite
- Protect, resource and empower District Governors, khans, maliks, mullahs
- Use the shura to gain trust and confidence of local communities

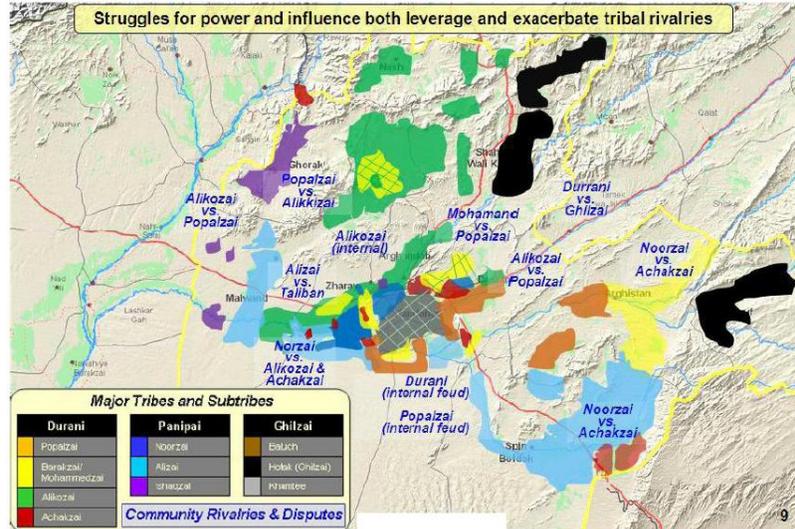
Economic Opportunity

- Address principal sources of corruption and grievance: contracting, private security companies, land disputes
- Significantly expand electrical supply to meet rising demand

Progress over months; process not an event



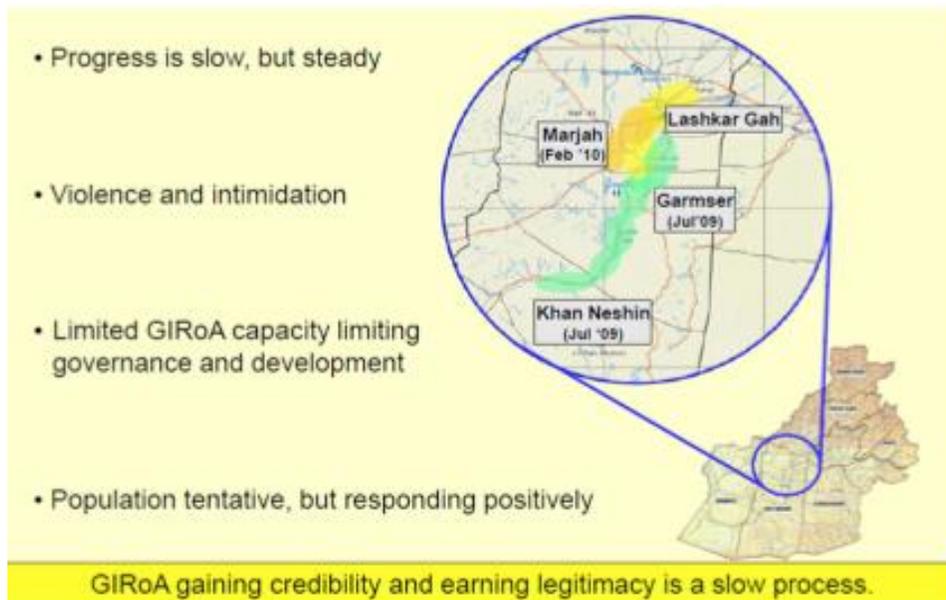
ISAF, May 2010



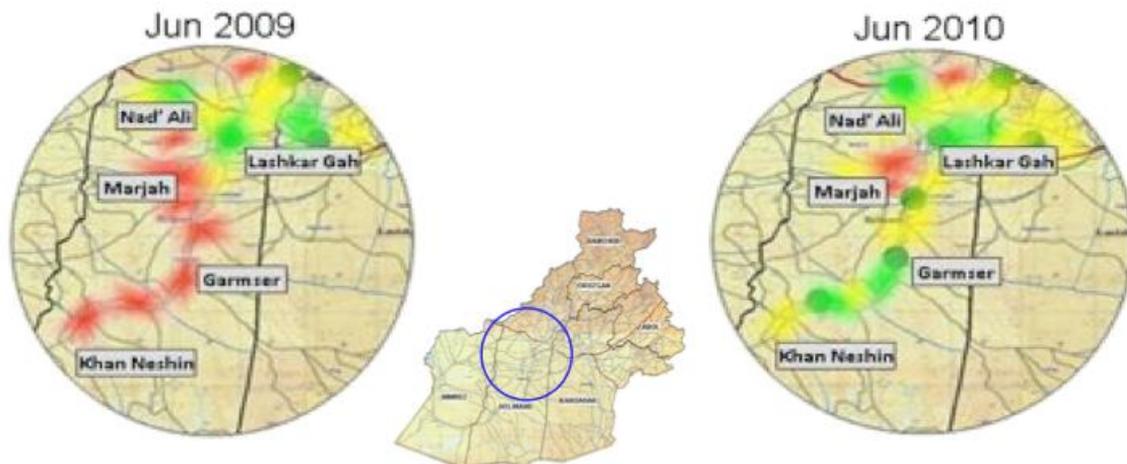
ISAF, May 2010

Figure Four: Spinning Problems into Success: Two Different Reports on Progress in Helmand

Exaggerating Gains Beyond Reasonable Limits: ISAF Map, May 2010



Putting Progress in Helmand in an Honest Context: ISAF, June 2010



- Central Helmand under insurgent control; Marjah insurgent-narco hub
- Restricted freedom of movement; illegal checkpoints and IEDs
- Negative perception of GIRoA

- Initiative shifting to Coalition; presence in every major village
- Increased freedom of movement; IED threat remains
- Attitude of population trending positive